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Vol. 13, Issue 5

Free minds Connect

A vibrant illustration of a yellow house with a blue roof and a blue awning over the entrance. A large, diverse crowd of people is gathered in front of the house, many of whom are dancing or socializing. The scene is set outdoors with green trees in the background and a string of colorful triangular flags hanging across the top. The overall atmosphere is festive and community-oriented.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Dear Free Minds Unity In Community Members!

Warm greetings! Today we held a bimonthly gathering at the Free Minds office for members just home to get connected to our reentry services. We call this gathering our reentry orientation, but really it is a raucous, joy-filled **celebration of community!** During the orientation sessions, members who have just recently returned to the community reunite with their fellow Free Minds members and staff. I want you to know that although you may not be there physically (yet!), you are always there in that room with us in spirit. We can't wait to welcome you home too. Free Minds is a very special collective united by our love of learning and literature, and our commitment to healing, transformation, and hope.

This issue is filled to the brim with positive connections. As FM member AHA writes, "Communities are lifelines for many, so I always say honor it, enjoy what it brings and create lifelong bonds from it" (page 8). CS reflects on the support of his community, his loved ones, and how that lifeline motivated him to find his purpose: "They told me if I wake everyday and help one person, no matter how big or small, I would have that purpose I felt I needed... Their support gave me hope." Now, CS writes, "I am a role model within my community and I want to lead others to the same success I wish to have myself" (page 8). Your Free Minds family wants the same for all of you!

And if you're reading this and feeling disconnected from yourself or your community, turn to page 23 for Kelli's wonderful meditation, as she guides us all on an inner journey to embrace ourselves and our communities. As Kelli writes, "*YOU are a vital part of US, and together, we are stronger.*"

Free Minds member Joel reflects on the importance of open and honest communication to build community on page 13: "In prison, my poetry allowed me to connect with strangers. People don't always like to be honest and transparent, but when you are, the results can be amazing. I know there's a chance I'm going to have negative experiences, but I know to have positive ones I have to stay open." I love Joel's attitude,

and it's such good advice for all of us to remain open to positive experiences.

Joel isn't the only one connected with others through poetry, of course! Free Minds poets are making connections and building bridges all over the DC community and beyond through our community engagement program, On the Same Page: Free Minds Poetry in the Classroom and Community. I can't tell you how many times people have shared with us how moved they are after reading a Free Minds poem at one of our On the Same Page events. As I like to say, whenever a Free Minds poem is read, hope is spread. Thank you all for spreading hope!

I love all of the beautiful visions of community in the poems in this issue. I'll leave you with SJ's vision, which sums it up so powerfully:

*I once lived to better myself,
I now live to better the lives of those around me,
For in doing so, I am bettering myself,
When my community stands strong, so do I,
I am not apart from my community,
But my community is part of me universally!*

SJ's poem reminds me of the African idea of "ubuntu," sometimes translated as "I am because we are." People interpret this idea in different ways, but one way that comes to mind for me is the emphasis on the ways we are all parts of a larger community, and we all have a role to play. And of course we see this at Free Minds! We are all so grateful to each and every one of you for making our community the special place that it is.

Until next time,
Tara

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

Next Issue's Theme: The Future

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



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

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

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In Loving Memory

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

Rest in Power:

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

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

FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Sofia

Free Minds Travels to Detroit for FICPFM Convening

In early October, Free Minds Changemakers, Damon and Umar, along with Tara, traveled to Detroit, Michigan for the "Count US In" 2024 Formerly Incarcerated, Convicted People, and Families Movement (FICPFM) National Convening. The conference was for directly impacted families, allies to those who've been incarcerated, and more who are passionate about building a more unified front in the fight for justice and the rights of the formerly incarcerated and their families. Umar spoke on a panel focused on local strategies towards transforming the criminal legal system. Damon, Umar, and Tara also participated in networking opportunities, panel discussions, film screenings, and workshops all aimed at building a more equitable future, and celebrating the impactful work already being done in transforming the criminal legal system.

The Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens Welcomes Free Minds to Meet On the Same Page

The Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens, a national park located in Northeast DC dedicated to cultivating aquatic plants, welcomed



Free Minds for a special On the Same Page event outside in nature! The event was open to the public and community members joined Free Minds staff and Poet Ambassadors in the serene setting of the gardens. Attendees got the chance to join the Free Minds team at picnic tables right next to the lotus flowers and heard poetry shared by the Poet Ambassadors, who also shared their experiences with incarceration and the power of writing. The attendees then left feedback on poems sent in by Free Minds members who are currently incarcerated. Afterwards, the community members had the opportunity to write poems of their own in response to nature and healing-themed writing prompts. The event was a powerful testament to the combined healing properties of writing and nature.

Free Minds Annual Cookout

Free Minds members, staff, friends, and family came together for a celebratory cookout at Hains Point Park in Southwest, DC. We enjoyed classic cookout dishes like hamburgers, baked beans, potato salad, corn on the cob and fried chicken to name a few, while joining together in community to celebrate one another. The sun beamed down on the Free Minds team while members, staff, and friends enjoyed conversations and shared laughs with one another. There were giant-sized versions of classic games like Jenga, chess, and Connect-four, and a playground where the children of Free Minds members played. Everyone enjoyed music together and learned a new line dance. This joyful day was a beautiful reminder of the collective strength and joy that gets the Free Minds team through the ups, downs, and everything in between!

QUOTE-I-VATOR



FREE MINDS MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the June/July/August Connect Ancestors 2024 and August/September 2024 Connect Liberation.

ER: Free Minds has created a safe place for people like me to creatively convey our humanity to the world and remind all that we matter too.

JWJ: I really like the info in the *Connect* newsletters. I like the Around The World section because I love to travel and want to go to many new places. I loved reading about Dubai and Thailand. I also like the Tech Talk articles a lot.

LJ: I loved that book *Creatures of Passage*. The lady in the trunk who banged on stuff, that car was cool how it never needed gas and how she knew just where to be at the right time. And I loved that it's set in Washington, DC. Yeehaw!!

DVJ: I feel more connected to the last BAM book *Creatures of Passage* because the land where they spoke to the River Man used to be the land of Natives, so I read that in one night!

JS: I continue to thoroughly enjoy the Free Minds magazine issues. It gives me a much needed opportunity to connect with others on positive topics. I am inspired, motivated, and uplifted by hearing of people's success after coming home and reentering society. Thank you!! These magazines let me know that I'm not in this fight alone, even when I feel like I am.

DAJ: One of the most important things that I've seen in the Free Minds *Connect* June/July 2024 Ancestors issue was Family History. There are many great reasons to know and understand the who, what, when, where, why and how our people came to be.

MAR: In the *Connect* issue Ancestors, the Somali indigenous oral poetry really resonated with me. I can see how men, women, and children of the U.S. carceral system can benefit from this poetry practice profoundly.



Tupac Shakur

"There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about."

– Margaret J. Wheatley, American Writer

"I am a reflection of the community."

– Tupac Shakur, American Rapper, Actor, and Poet

"The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members."

– Coretta Scott King, American Author, Activist, and Civil Rights Leader

"Empathy is the starting point for creating a community and taking action. It's the impetus for creating change."

– Max Carver, American Actor

"Do not let where you come from define you, but never forget the values you learned from your close community."

– Anthony Carmona, Former President of Trinidad and Tobago

"Human rights, race relations, gender politics, health care, and foreign policy—it's a lot to keep track of, and yet all of these things affect us in our daily lives. Making sense of everything requires meticulous unpacking of feelings, delicate navigation of social norms, and a community of love to help along the way."

– Tracee Ellis Ross, American Actress

"It's really important for everyone in our community to stand for something."

– Young Dolph, American Rapper

"Justice that is not rooted in equity, in social welfare, and in community is not justice at all."

– DeRay Mckesson, American Activist

FAMILY TIES: CO-PARENTING ON THE INSIDE AND THE OUTSIDE

Interview by Rebecca



For this issue's Family Ties column, Rebecca had the chance to talk with Victor, a Free Minds member who recently returned home, about how he maintained his familial relationships while incarcerated.

Rebecca: Who does your family consist of?

Victor: My son and his mom, they're my family. Her side of the family are my family.

Rebecca: What impact did your incarceration have on relationships with family?

Victor: I lost a lot of people because of some of my decision making. I went to prison for almost eight years of my life, and those are years that I won't get back. And I lost a lot of people; death or just we don't communicate anymore. The relationship that I had with my son's mom in prison was a bit difficult, but we maintained a relationship for the sake of my son. And she always reminded him that there's no other father but me in his life. She always kept that in his head, reminded him who his dad was.

Rebecca: What are some things you did to stay connected to your son and his mom?

Victor: I was writing poetry, sending poems out to them, drawing, making colorful, beautiful cards. And calling as much as I could. It was hard for me to maintain those relationships from the inside, but I was able to maintain the most important relationships. And that was with my son and my son's mom.

Rebecca: Are there ways that your son and his mother were able to reach out to you and help maintain those relationships?

Victor: My son telling me every time that he loved me always gave me hope to not give up and to continue doing what I have to do because there's somebody out there that needs me. And that was him. And I couldn't give up on him. And still today, he's my reason for me taking my breaths for real because if I didn't have my son, I think I'd probably be lost, not giving a hell about my life.

Rebecca: What advice would you give to folks who are still inside and wanting to maintain those relationships with their family?

Victor: Do everything that you are able to do to keep those relationships because there's a lot of relationships that you can lose. And once you lose the opportunity of having that chance to fix

a relationship and you didn't fix it, it's over. So don't give up hope, be strong, keep a positive mindset. Stay motivated, and give that same motivation to your kids, to your wives, moms, dads, brothers, sisters, and just maintain those relationships. I wish I could have a relationship with my mother, relationship with my father, granny, granddad. I wish I had a brother. I wish I had a sister. I wish I had all of that, but I don't have it. But I'm not going to give up hope. I know that everything that I didn't have, I'm going to give to my child.

Rebecca: Now that you're home, what are you doing to build upon those connections with your son and his mother that you were able to maintain while inside?

Victor: I just try my best to be there for them in every way that I can be there for them. Right now, I'm dealing with a small, long-distance relationship. I live three hours away. I'm not with them right now. I FaceTime (video call) them every day. I call them every day. I text them every day. If I have it, I'll do it because whatever makes them happy, makes me happy. So, I do everything that I can to keep this relationship strong and going.

Rebecca: What would you say to family and friends who are on the outside as far as how they can support their loved ones who are incarcerated?

Victor: Be there for them, man. The small things count for brothers inside. They want somebody to talk to. That's something that I always needed, and not just me, all the brothers in prison, brothers and sisters. You need that comfort. You need that type of love. You need somebody. You need to feel like you have somebody there for you, and I've always longed for that since I've been in prison, and I know that that's what everybody needs. Do the small things that count. A letter, a birthday card, an "I love you." Answer the phone for five minutes. Everybody got a life out here, but share five minutes of your time. Make them feel like you got them on your mind because inside, we feel out of sight, out of mind.

Rebecca: Our theme for this issue is community. How do you define community and what does it mean to you in your life?

Victor: How I define it for real is communication, everybody being together. We're all we've got.

Rebecca: How has community impacted you?

Victor: If anything, I impacted my community in a negative way when I was once a destructive individual, but now I'm impacting my community in a positive way. I learned from what I did and I'm turning it into something positive, coming back out here to try to help people and help myself be a better person because that's just what it's supposed to be. We only live life one time.

JUST LAW: IRAA – CURRENT CASE LAW UPDATE *By Tim*

In 2016, the Council of the District of Columbia enacted the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act ("IRAA"), which allows for persons serving a term of imprisonment for violations of the law they committed before they were 25 years old to seek modification of their sentence. This information is provided as a reminder to men and women who are seeking reduction of their sentences and release pursuant to IRAA to stay on point with their research and up to date with current case law. Below, a summary is provided of two interesting recent (2024) IRAA cases decided by the DC Court of appeals.

Case A:

This case involves a person who was released on parole and sought a sentence reduction under the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA). *The court had to decide if parolees could get this kind of relief and if his appeal was moot (having little or no practical relevance).*

Following affirmance of denial of motion for post-conviction relief, 36 A.3d 363, and ultimate sentence of life with possibility of parole for first-degree premeditated murder, 163 A.3d 777, the individual filed a motion to reduce his sentence under the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA) because the offense was committed before his 25th birthday. The Superior Court, Lynn Leibovitz, J., denied the motion. He appealed.

- **Background:** The individual was convicted of first-degree premeditated murder and sentenced to life with the possibility of parole. He later sought a sentence reduction under the IRAA since he committed the crime before turning 25.
- **Trial Court's Decision:** The trial court denied his IRAA motion due to concerns about his release plan and disciplinary history while incarcerated, even though he was released on parole during the motion's pendency.
- **Appeal and Mootness:** The government argued that his release on parole made his appeal moot, but the court found that he still faced injuries due to parole conditions and an operative sentence, making his appeal valid.
- **Eligibility of Parolees for IRAA Relief:** The court concluded that parolees are not automatically ineligible for IRAA relief as long as they have served the requisite 15 years in prison.
- **Legal Errors in Trial Court's Decision:** The trial court committed legal errors by not making express findings on his dangerousness and whether the interests of justice warranted a sentence modification.
- **Misapplication of Factors:** The trial court misapplied factor eight by considering his family and community circumstances at the time of the motion rather than at the time of the offense.
- **Improper Weighing of Evidence:** The trial court did not abuse its discretion in weighing evidence related to his disciplinary infractions and family support, but a remand was necessary for reconsideration.

Case B:

The case involves a person who appealed after the Superior Court dismissed his motion to reduce his sentence under the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA) as premature. The Court of Appeals reversed this decision, clarifying when an IRAA order becomes final.

Under the IRAA, defendants can move for subsequent sentence

modifications *three years* after the order on their previous application becomes final. In this individual's appeal, the Court was asked to determine whether an order deciding an IRAA motion becomes final on the date of docketing of the trial court's written order, or after the time for appeal has lapsed. This appellant filed an initial IRAA application in 2018, which was denied in part by the trial court in 2019. He appealed to this court, which affirmed the trial court's decision on October 6, 2021. In January 2023, more than three years after the trial court's order on his initial application, he filed a notice of intent to file a second IRAA application. After initially ordering briefing on the matter, the trial court dismissed his second IRAA application as premature and, therefore, untimely. The trial court determined that the time for him to file his second IRAA application was not yet ripe because an order on an IRAA application does not become final until the filing of the appellate mandate, if the applicant appeals the order.

The DC Court of Appeals disagreed with the trial court and held that an order on an IRAA application becomes final on the date of the trial court's order on the application, regardless of whether the movant appeals the initial determination. Accordingly, the Court of Appeals reversed the trial court's decision and remanded for further proceedings on his second, timely filed IRAA application.

- **Background and Appeal:** The individual filed an appeal after the Superior Court dismissed his motion to reduce his sentence under the IRAA as premature and untimely.
- **Initial IRAA Application:** He initially applied for a sentence reduction in 2018, which was partially granted in 2019, reducing his sentence but not granting immediate release.
- **Appeal and Subsequent IRAA Application:** After his initial application was partially denied, he appealed, and the Court of Appeals affirmed the decision in 2021. He then filed a notice of intent for a second IRAA application in 2023.
- **Superior Court's Dismissal:** The Superior Court ruled that his second IRAA application was premature because it believed the three-year waiting period started after the appellate mandate, not the trial court's order.
- **Finality of IRAA Orders:** The Court of Appeals held that an IRAA order becomes final when the trial court docket its written order, regardless of the appeal process.
- **Statutory Interpretation:** The Court emphasized that the statutory language and legislative intent support the interpretation that the finality of an IRAA order is based on the trial court's written order, not the appellate process.
- **Legislative Intent:** The IRAA aims to provide juvenile offenders with meaningful opportunities for sentence modification based on maturity and rehabilitation, supporting the Court's interpretation.
- **Conclusion:** The Court of Appeals reversed the Superior Court's decision and remanded the case for further proceedings on his second IRAA application.

Check out our next *Connect The Future* (Volume 14, Issue 1) to read the summaries of two additional recent (2024) IRAA cases decided by the DC Court of appeals.

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

MEMBERS *CONNECT*: COMMUNITY

Community By AHA

You know you have a good community when you are surrounded by those who have your best interest at heart and care for you as if you all were family. This is the community I recall growing up, and how I learned to view what a community should be and what it should look like. When someone is in need of assistance then they are assisted.

Within a community, no one is left behind and all are on board with what your agenda and goals are for that community you represent. I recall in my community people would say growing up that we hated police, but we just did not trust them, so very different from what was perceived. Those in a community, you trust, so with it that foundation is built.

I've learned to honor and respect this sense of community when I have it, so it's something I am loyal and dedicated to. Communities are lifelines for many, so I always say honor it, enjoy what it brings and create lifelong bonds from it.

Finding Purpose in Community By CS

I believe family doesn't always share the same blood. So with that I would say my community is sort of a family. I say this in the sense that I present myself to them in the same manner as I would my children or the ones I love dearly and hold close. I want to provide them with the emotional support, morals, and values they need to make it through life. I want to see them doing amazing things that will bring them all they seek.

Diversity in a community within itself is an instant reflection of strength. Just having the view of a united group instantly radiates that strength. Diversity benefits the community by bringing strengths from each differing background. It can benefit by bringing forth peace, purpose, and shared passion. We each have different drives. In a diverse community you combine these drives which then become available to use as a source of empowerment. In diverse groups you transform within yourself helping to awaken new opportunities in which you can then use to mentor your peers. Diversity within a community brings multi-faced resources for use to sail through the calm, or be used as a combined strength to face stormy weather. You each have powers inside you, not just to survive, but to thrive. These powers are always better in numbers. You can help construct productive paths for one another; help inspire growth within. When we realize beauty comes from the inside we will truly understand what beauty is. When you have a real understanding of this you then use that beauty to build others from the inside out. Diverseness period paves the way for an all inclusive world. A world where everyone can stand on a united front as one, without separation. This will allow for a pool of peace and a world full of happiness where everyone can accept one another for exactly who they are and where they come from.

Unity would be one common goal that would benefit the community. We could replace negative thoughts with positive ones. Use uplifting words. We could quit viewing one another based on background, outward appearance, or beliefs. We could use our individual strengths to sharpen what may be a weakness in others.

We could definitely communicate properly. Period. The role I might play would definitely be a listener who gives advice in an unbiased manner. I would be someone who spoke on peace and unity. I would be someone who also carries themselves in this manner for others to see. Most people want to "follow" someone, always be that positive for them to seek. Be the change you wish to see within your community.

I belong to my prison community, as well as my community of family. The prison community has helped shape the leader I consider myself to be. I am reminded daily that someone is always watching and I can't go around doing things I would advise others against. I am a role model within my community and I want to lead others to the same success I wish to have myself. My community in my family instilled morals and values with my being that I choose to use as my daily code.

I remember in the beginning feeling so alone, sitting in a jail surrounded by so many. I would wake up and feel as if I didn't have a purpose. I couldn't find the motivation needed to push through my days. I would call home and my moms would remind me over and over to come back to them in the end of this as the person they've known me to be, yet not as the one that paved the path that led me where I am currently sitting. They told me to wake each day and put my best foot forward to make a change within myself that I could radiate outwardly to the jail/prison, community that surrounds me. They told me if I wake everyday and help one person, no matter how big or small, I would have that purpose I felt I needed. It wasn't until I started going back and forth to court seeing all the faces of the ones I left behind supporting me that I got that push I truly needed. Their support gave me hope. It gave me acceptance from the ones I needed it from. It made me feel as if my mistakes were truly just mistakes in life. All this made me believe in myself. It helped me to realize/feel that I could be successful in whatever purpose I found no matter where life drives me through all this.

My Home, My Community By RNM

Community and family are symptomatically one inherent in the behaviors we are raised from. At home is how I felt in my community. All of my neighbors were surrogate parents whom would discipline me, then take me to my parents who would discipline me again. My mother would give me clothes, food, money to give to this neighbor and that neighbor, assisting all of our neighbors with essential things they needed. My neighbors would feed me, take me in out of the cold or rain, let me, my brothers, my sisters, sleep over anytime. They would parent us, and we would mind them. Elders of the community would obtain a license to block off a number of our streets, to function block party with a barbeque cookout, music, dancing, drillin', racing, and other competitive sports, which benefitted, empowered, strengthened our community. Then, soldiers returned from the military... guns and drugs came into our communities, more police were trained on our community. An exodus took place and the poor moved away seeking better housing, better schools, better locations, safe to raise children. Our former communities crumbled. Our new community was welcoming but standoffish of familiarity, charity, unity in the community. Those golden ages were gone. But the struggles and the police trained on the Black community continues on.

SPINNING THE TRACK WITH THE ADVICE MAN

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

Dear Advice Man,

How do I forgive myself for my shortcomings?

Sincerely,
BG

Okay BG and FM family,

My friend Mr. EG said, "Anger is a corrosive emotion that hardens the heart and kills the spirit. Forgiveness is the antidote that frees the mind of anger. Thus, by acknowledging your shortcomings you've taken a major step toward redemption." – Mr. EG

Please understand that despite what the streets, society, and the world may portray, NO ONE is born or ever will be perfect throughout their whole life here. Society tries to make us believe people's character and things around them are perfect; when true-in-deed people and society have all kinds of imperfections or messes going on within them. The only time we should be concerned with flaws is when they fall out of place with society rules and fall short of compassion, sympathy, and consideration.

BG, let me tell you why you should forgive yourself. It's because everyone has flaws. Change and forgiveness come by understanding shortcomings and how making efforts to correct them is the medicine. What a great thing it is to climb up out of the old negative defects in character we had to coexist with others. To do so is to forgive all our earlier chapters of shortcomings. When you share wisdom from old shortcomings with others, that mentoring uplifts them; it also uplifts you and everything around you, and gives your soul and mind permission to forgive and forget old faults.

This reminds me of the Serenity Prayer, often used in recovery programs: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I can not change; give me the courage to change the things that I can. And give me the wisdom to know the difference."

Use this time to make a new you. How do we do this great thing? We have to be able to endure tragedy and setbacks. We have to "love" where we've evolved from and be proud of what all that includes from that very

moment when we have that lightbulb moment. Thus, from this moment forward, learn to find joy in every single thing that happens. There's beauty rising up out of the dirt above the mud from a seed into your new form. The question is, who do you want to be?

The lesson we wish to pass on is this: you have to apply (put in work) educating yourself on negative behavior and be obsessed with maturing, growing and evolving. In the past, I lacked knowing what was a healthy relationship and how to properly communicate. In finding out what was what, I maintained a course in group sessions in all places I wouldn't think I would be in like Health Services meetings and college courses in here where I gained positive critical thinking skills. And BG, I'm still at work on me. Right now you are helping me, so today I can forgive my old self when society, friends, and family notice the new me.

This now means we're not upset or heartbroken by our past faults. When we look back at all our life's different fights or struggles, now we will appreciate and understand how good it feels when somebody from home calls us CHAMP. At that very moment, we know deep down inside how many victories we've won to survive. From this point onward, it does make sense to always put our "best and good" foot forward, because it's never too late to make a fresh start.

I understand my wrongs of yesterday, and today, know that certain things – especially bad circumstances – some were outside of my control. So along with my change everyday to climb up out of the place I put myself in, I understand I have to love to face whatever challenge the world throws at me with an unflinching cheerfulness. Peace comes from putting our energies, emotions, and exertion where they will have a real impact. This is one way in our present situations where we will find we can forgive ourselves. Just think about it family, if we all or the majority of us get on this same accord and return back into our community, our community's future will have a real chance of turning into a special place for us and our youth. BG and FM family thank you for this moment.

My Best,
TS

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Now That's What I Call Community

By RNM

In harmony my family with families
Living next door to me
Across the street - in back of me
A dozen blocks down the streets
Neighbors - kin - friends - associates
Connected & linked in a community
Helping one another with necessities
Helping each other doing favors - labor
Wherever our children are in need
Providing a safe place on our streets
To play together, walk together
Sit together & talk together
Reunite outdoors socially - picnic - compete
Strengthen our ties of community
With unity in our community
Now that's what I call community

Community

By CMK

My community is safe, we are all in a better
Mental state
Gentrification is new, I accept all human race
I can't change the world, but I help make my
Community a better place
Feeding my neighbor puts us in a safe space
Fresh flowers, green grass, that's how I want my freedom to
look and taste
Caring for the wellbeing of others is the humanly way

Community

By JS

When I think of community
I think of unity
It's not just an area with a bunch of houses or apartments
Or both where people live
It's an area with support and love
Where people stand together
Through whatever
It's something where if you need, then I got
And if I hurt then you hurt too
It's something when if there's a problem we stop at nothing
to find the solution
Community to me, is when we recognize if one of us falls it's
as if we've all fallen down Community is recognizing your
true family
The people you love and who love you
The people who you choose to be around, community is unity

Community

By BG

I would not be if it were not for my community
I was taught to be who I am today
I thank God for keeping my family and community in shape
As I spend time away
One day... we shall reunite
Until then, I'll use lessons learned as I reach you
Pushing this pen
Changing mindsets
For the betterment of my community of
Family and friends

NA

By Regina

NA saved me when I was at my lowest
Lost my focus
I was hopeless

NA gave me a sense of belonging
When I felt unnoticed and lonely

NA showed me love when I felt I didn't love myself
Was out of touch with who I am and really didn't give a
damn

NA helped rebuild my self-confidence and self-esteem
Showed me how to love me again which WAS SO uplifting

NA gave me friends who really cared
Not fake friends, they didn't pretend
They gave me a sense of family
The kind that love me unconditionally

NA is a community, that no matter what will not give up on you
No matter how many times you may fall
They are there to lend a hand to help you back on your feet

Narcotics Anonymous is the community that helped shape
the person you see in me

My Community

By SJ

I once lived to better myself,
I now live to better the lives of those around me,
For in doing so, I am bettering myself,
When my community stands strong, so do I,
I am not apart from my community,
But my community is part of me universally!

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

A Message to the Community:

A Letter from Prison

By RGW

I offer my condolences to the families who have lost loved ones
And became victims to the violence

I offer my apologies for having been derelict in my duty and
responsibility

as a man

In not being the guardian, educator, and leader my
communities needed

In order to be vital and life-affirming

I want to inform you that it is my goal to counteract the
insanity of the
destructive mindset

And I do not embrace those who prey upon any people
But particularly, my people

I want my voice to be heard:

Let the violence, drug dealing, physical, and spiritual abuse of the
communities stop

As a man, I want it to be known that I have come to value
and recognize

That the children need and deserve a safe and secure
environment in which

to grow and develop,

Be educated, have access to equal opportunities to excel,

And become who the Creator intended them to be

I ask that everyone reading or hearing this looks at a child
Whether at home, school, at play, in church, or mosque,
and consider
these words:

I am the African child

The whole world awaits my coming, all the earth watches
with interest

To see what I shall become

Civilization hangs in the balance; for what I am, the world of
tomorrow will be

I am the African child

You have brought me into this, about which I know nothing

You hold in your hand my destiny

You determine whether I shall succeed or fail

Give me, I beg you, a world where I can walk tall and proud

Train me, as is your duty unto me

To love myself, and my people

And to build and maintain a great nation

It is I who proclaim

I am the African child

The whole world awaits my coming, I shall not delay it

For I too have a dream

MEMBERS CONNECT: COMMUNITY

My Community is a Universe By RW

Community rituals, happy families posing in special moments
taking sentimental pictures.

Growing up in SW, Washington, DC, separated by wards and
quadrants. You can visit historical places like our White House and
the Monument.

Having dreams of waking up in an odyssey of exotic animals during
the autumn time of year. The ground is covered in turpentine
leaves falling out the trees. The weather is very therapeutic, excited
walking in groups knocking on doors, it's Halloween. Wearing our
costumes prepared from scratch created by leftover clothes that
didn't match.

Thanksgiving rolls around keeping a watchful eye on our weight.
This was the early 80's families pigging out during this special feast

with food on their heavy plates. Enjoying the Washington football
team destroy their arch nemesis Dallas Cowboys on national
television. This was a special moment when Washington celebrated
a touchdown in the endzone called the fun bunch led by Art Monk.

Summertime was my favorite time of the year, no school to travel
and explore my neighborhood. Visiting all the rec centers, Bald
Eagle, Friendship and Fort Grabble. This was where I learned how to
become domesticated. Everyone had funny nicknames that we all
claimed where it came from. I never realized how much we needed
each other to coexist in poverty. I sit here with a smile on my face
reminiscent. In memory of those adolescent years objectively
introspecting my mind imagining..

My community is a Universe.



TECH TALK: PREPARING FOR REENTRY – SOCIAL MEDIA APPS

By Emily

Hi all! Welcome back to another edition of the Tech Column. This issue we are talking about community, so we thought it would be appropriate to share more information about how people find community online. You have probably heard of social media apps like **Facebook**, **Instagram**, **TikTok**, and **X** (which used to be called Twitter). These are all websites that you can access either on your phone or on your computer to connect with your friends that you already know in real life, and with people all around the world.

For each of these platforms you need to first make an account. Typically, you will need an email address in order to set up an account (see the Liberation issue of the *Connect* for tips on creating an email). When you create a social media account, it is important to be careful with what information you share. Different people will have different limits to what they feel comfortable putting on the internet. The most important thing to remember is that once you put something on the internet, it is very difficult to completely remove it. For these reasons, some people choose not to include their last names or other personal information on their profiles. Others choose not to share their photo or not to share their children's photos. The amount that you share is up to you.

Facebook

Facebook is considered by most to be the "original" social media platform. You can create your own personal profile that has as much information as you want to add—most people put their name, a profile picture of themselves, and some information about where they live or where they are from. You can then add people that you know by searching their name and clicking "Add friend." This is called *friending* them. You will see text posts and photos from your Facebook friends on the main page of the app. You can leave comments on their posts or send them private messages. Many people also join Facebook *groups* related to their interests. For example, there is a Washington Commanders Fans Facebook group where people post stats, talk about the games, and share pictures.

Instagram

Instagram is primarily a photo sharing app, although users can also share videos (called *reels* within the app). On Instagram, the content you will see will mostly be from people that you choose to *follow*. When you *follow* an account, their *posts* (photos and videos) will show up in your feed (the main page of the app).

Most people follow their friends and family on Instagram in order to see the pictures that they share. I also like to follow local news pages that post about events and happenings in DC. You can also follow celebrities, news outlets, and even famous pets on Instagram to see their updates.

TikTok

TikTok is a video-sharing platform. Users make videos (called *tiktoks*) and upload them to the app. However, you do not need to make your own videos to enjoy TikTok. Many people use it to watch videos about their interests. Whether you like sports, cooking, dancing, or cute dog videos, you can find them all on TikTok. When you make an account the app will show you something called your "For You Page." Here, the app will show you videos. Based on whether you like or comment on the video and how long you watch it before scrolling to the next one, the app will begin to learn what type of content you enjoy and start to show you more of that content. You may have read about TikTok in the news—some U.S. legislators want to ban the app because of data privacy concerns.

X

X, formerly known as Twitter, is mostly a text sharing app. People write short posts, called *tweets*, about anything they want. There is a 280 character limit, though you can pay to write more, so most tweets are pretty short. You can also post images and videos. Elon Musk bought X last year and at that time many users stopped using it, though usage has increased since then. In my experience, people often turn to X more for news and people's analysis of the news. People tend to follow many people that they do not know in real life on X—be that journalists, celebrities, or cultural commentators.

WhatsApp

WhatsApp is mostly a messaging service but is also considered social media. You can use it to text and call your friends and family just like you would a regular phone—the main difference is that your messages and calls use the internet instead of cell service. This can be helpful for communicating with people in other countries, as cell phone plans usually do not include international calls unless you pay extra, but internet-based messaging like WhatsApp is free. You can video chat with people on WhatsApp. People can also post status updates and pictures on WhatsApp that disappear after 24 hours.

REENTRY PROFILE: JOEL'S STORY

Interview by Arva

For this reentry profile, I had the pleasure of speaking with Free Minds member Joel, who came home under Compassionate Release after serving 20 years. Joel's story is one that showcases the importance of authentic connections and supportive communities. For him, connection is central to it all, with honesty being the bridge to forming real connections. Joel touches on the emotional clarity he has achieved through the power of writing, which he extends to other areas in life by approaching his relationships with directness and honesty. Our conversation highlights how a strong community is built on respect when people are able to be their true selves.

Arva: Hey Joel, let's start with a little about yourself—whatever comes to mind.

Joel: I'm a 3rd generation Washingtonian, born and raised in Washington, D.C. I'm a returning citizen. I did 20 years inside of a prison. I've been home since December 22nd last year. I have one daughter. I'm a personal trainer, I'm a part of the newest cohort of the Georgetown Pivot Program, a business and entrepreneurship-oriented reentry program, and I'm also a community service worker at a community mental health organization in D.C. that offers mental health and home health services. I have about five part-time jobs currently and I enjoy most of them immensely.

Arva: That's very impressive. How did you discover Free Minds?

Joel: While inside, Free Minds would send a good friend of mine books and he'd let me read some of them first. One day he was like, "you're from DC, you can join them too," so I wrote them and they started sending me the books I requested. Over the course of 20 years, I've read at the very least 1 book a week, if not more. When I came home, Free Minds received and embraced me, and have continued to do so. I'm a tourist in my own city now and it's exciting, but like any tourist, you need someone to help you navigate the terrain. You need someone to give you grace. From then till now, Free Minds has been family.

Arva: That's great to hear. We describe Free Minds as a community of support, so it's always nice to hear stories like yours. What did you discover about yourself through writing?

Joel: It forced me to learn how to use emotional language. We think in words. So if I'm mislabeling my feelings, I'm thinking the wrong word. That's how important writing is, the more that you can understand and command words, the easier it is for you to process it mentally. First day out, people would ask me how it feels to be released. All I'll say is amazing but if I were to really label all those feelings it would be fifty different things. If it's a feeling it's usually one word. If it's more than one word, it's a

thought. So if I'm frustrated in the moment, I'm always trying to find that one word. I don't really like long, drawn-out poems. I love when somebody can say something complex in a direct way. That's my goal. It forces me to try to sift through all these emotions to what I'm really feeling.

Arva: That's very powerful. You could really apply that to every area of your life.

Joel: Yeah, I make myself vulnerable because I really want to connect with people. I feel like that's what this human experience is about. In prison, my poetry allowed me to connect with strangers. People don't always like to be honest and transparent, but when you are, the results can be amazing. I know there's a chance I'm going to have negative experiences, but I know to have positive ones I have to stay open. If your hands are balled up, nobody can take nothing from you but nobody can give you nothing either. You have to be equally open to the whole process: the good, the bad, the pain, the whole thing!

Arva: I read a lot of spirituality books and that's basically what they talk about! Being able to freely feel your emotions and accepting the good with the bad.

Joel: I think that's the part that we're not really taught. In Western civilization, we are taught to celebrate success and accomplishment. People are very comfortable calling you with great news, but not with bad news. Those are really the times when we need the connection. But true connection and dialogue comes only when I am comfortable being honest. Anytime someone gives me an answer I hate, I get excited because it makes me think it's the truth and now we can really have a conversation.

Arva: So you're saying showing up as your authentic self and being transparent is the key.

Joel: Mhm. The most supportive communities I've been in are the ones that respect and embrace the fact that I'm there and being transparent. That makes me connect with them more even if we don't agree. How beautiful is that! We are able and willing to say "I lay myself bare, judge me with my opinions. I am okay with that." Expressing what you really feel can be hard because sometimes the feeling isn't even processed. But I don't hold many of my feelings, I unprocess. I go to sleep feeling great because I was authentic, I was sincere, and I felt like I added value.

Joel is now helping to nurture our supportive Free Minds community in reentry as a Poet Ambassador and a contributor in the Build Up, our weekly reading and writing group.

REAL WORLD OF WORK: JERMAINE'S STORY

Interview by Jennifer

Have you ever been to the Washington Auto Show to check out the 700 cars on display at the Washington Convention Center? Or have you seen a movie with a convention floor set up with lots of booths and stages? Well, if you—like me—have wondered how a huge event space could be converted from hosting the Dental Association's equipment one week and the Bridal expo's runway the next, you could ask Free Minds member Jermaine, who is currently a first-year apprentice with the Trade Show Carpenters Local 491. He is learning the art of building and breaking down the exhibit space for events all over DC and Maryland.

On a recent fall afternoon, Jermaine and I met for lunch at The Roost, a 12,500 square foot food hall on the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and 14th Street, SE across the street from the Potomac Avenue Metro. The best way to describe The Roost is that it's similar to a 1980's style mall food court, but instead of everyone lining up at Sbarro's or Panda Express then looking for a seat, you sit down at a table first, scan the QR code, type in your credit card number, and then order food from any of the 10 vendors, which gets brought to your table. Jermaine and I opted for salads, pastries, and a fresh squeezed juice called the "What's up doc?" which Bugs Bunny would like because of all those carrots, along with OJ, honey, and turmeric that went into it! We munched while we discussed his carpentry career with the trade show union.

Did you join the union immediately after coming home?

No, I came home in September 2023 and got to work shortly after I obtained my driver's license. My first job was delivering auto parts, which is how I quickly learned I didn't like that kind of driving job!

Since I had the support of my brother letting me live in his house rent-free, I didn't have the urgent need to take just any job. So, I signed up for a month-long Work Readiness & Financial Literacy training program through Career Shop DC, which had a stipend, but was not a full-time salary. One day we had a field trip to a big job fair at the DC Armory and I met a representative of one of the unions. He grew up in DC, joined the Carpenters' union after having been incarcerated for a few years, and has advanced from Apprentice to Journeyman to Business Representative making six figures and driving a union vehicle home every night.

What did he tell you about unions that sounded so appealing?

The unions often use the "earn while you learn" slogan to distinguish

themselves from traditional schools where you sit in a classroom and pay tuition before graduating and getting a paying job. With a union apprenticeship program, members start earning wages and benefits on the first day. We get healthcare benefits, an annuity, a pension, required training, as well as access to unlimited free training for life.

I was planning to apply to the Local 5 Plumbers Union, but first I attended another job training program—this one was a construction pre-apprenticeship training program through the AFL-CIO to help get more DC residents into the building trades unions. And guess who attended that graduation? The same Business Manager from the job fair, and he recommended that I could get to work sooner and earn more money with the Trade Show Carpenters Local 491. I applied, scored well on the test, and was already starting to work by the time the Plumbers called me, so I felt like I couldn't jump ship.

Where are some of the places you've worked as a trade show carpenter?

- A Million Lives Book Festival at the Baltimore Convention Center
- SAS show for Lockheed Martin at the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center
- ASTRO (American Society for Radiation Oncology) annual meeting at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center
- NATO Summit at the Andrew Mellon Auditorium on the National Mall
- AUSA (Association of the US Army) annual convention at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center

Wasn't the Army event just a few weeks ago? What did you do there?

Yes—and it was huge with over 30,000 attendees and 700+ exhibitors from more than 80 countries. This event was unusual because in addition to my regular jobs of marking the floors, laying carpets, building booths, and using forklifts to move equipment, I had to make special accommodations for all those tanks and other big pieces of military equipment! For example, we had to polyurethane (a synthetic resin that is used

in many industrial and consumer applications) the carpets, then lay special plates, which could support the tanks rolling in.

What's your favorite part of this job?

Sometimes I'll be working so long and so close on some details of a particular booth that it isn't until I take a few steps back that I can really admire the finished product I created with my two hands. I'm proud of the carpentry skills I've developed.

What is challenging?

While I was eager to join a union for its good salary, training, and community, I didn't realize that this Trade Show Carpentry union was seasonal and part-time work. I appreciate that the union has negotiated raises for us, so I now make \$30/hour regularly, \$45/hour on Saturdays, and \$60/hour on Sundays, but the schedule is inconsistent—averaging a couple of days each week. Not all shows need all 400 carpenters in the union, so I had to make an impression on the shop stewards and continue checking in with them to put me on the next job. It's a 3-year apprenticeship that you can complete and become a journeyman after 1300 required OJT (On the Job Training) hours per year required, plus all the mandatory (and unpaid) training.

It would be great if it were consistent, but I have to chase the work and I can't plan a second job—or a lot of other engagements—because I don't know far in advance if I'll be working back-to-back 14-hour days or having a week off, like I'm in the middle of today. I know myself well enough to know that it's healthier for me to have less unscheduled time and more consistent income. I'm eager to get my own place.

What career advice would you offer members?

Don't rush into jobs when you first come home if you have the time to take some training programs and research carefully the jobs you're applying to. I probably would have gone with the Plumbers Union if I had realized how part-time this Trade Show Carpentry union is. But it feels so good to be home working—I got to celebrate my brother's birthday with him in Vegas last month and I just got called to jury duty!

CONVERSACIONES DE MENTES LIBRES FREE MINDS CONVERSATIONS

Por/By Carlos

¡Saludos mi gente! Son mis grandes deseos que en el momento que estén leyendo este artículo, se encuentren con la mejor salud física al igual que mental. Para mi es un placer estar comunicado con ustedes por estados medios, entendiendo bien todo lo que es estar detrás de esas paredes y desear estar libre.

El tema de este artículo es "Comunidad." Cuando me di cuenta del tema de este mes, rápidamente supe que es lo que quería compartir con ustedes.

Primeramente y dar un poco de contexto para los están aquí con nosotros por primera vez, después de haber hecho 25 años en prisión, fui dado alivio bajo IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act) en 2020. Por mi estatus migratorio, fui deportado a mi país natal, Honduras.

En 1997 el juez me dio una sentencia de 35 años de vida a la edad de 19. Rápidamente fui mandado a la máxima seguridad en Lorton conocida como "la pared." Eso fue al principio de ese año, para ese tiempo ya sabíamos que las prisiones de Lorton iban a ser cerradas y que nos iban a trasladar a diferentes prisiones en la nación. En septiembre del mismo año, fui trasladado a Youngstown, Ohio. Más de 5 horas en automóvil lejos de mi familia. Por el resto de mi sentencia, estuvimos así, lejos de todo y todos. Fue como si nos tiraran donde fuera, lejos de nuestras familias y ser olvidado.

No había ninguna otra opción que endurecer esa distancia. Una de las cosas que siempre me ayudó en mi enjaulamiento, fue la lectura. Los libros siempre me ayudaban a escapar de esas paredes. Llegué a una etapa en la que era mandatorio tener una buena cantidad de libros en mi posesión. Me gustaba hacerlo porque en el sistema federal, cuando hay un "lockdown" largo, la lectura era lo que me ayudaba a pasar esos momentos. Normalmente, esos encierres traen una búsqueda general donde nos quitan todo de exceso o lo que no es permitido. No sé por qué, pero en esta ocasión, me llevaron todos mis libros y me quedé sin nada. En la primera oportunidad que tuve, pude pedirle a un amigo algo de leer. Como les dije, la lectura para mí era mandatoria, verdaderamente me sacaba de esas paredes. Bueno, mi amigo me dio dos libros junto con un sobre que contenía varias páginas dobladas dentro. "¡Escribes!" me dijo, "ellos te mandaran libros." Nunca olvidaré ese momento cuando mire ese sobre y en la esquina decía en la esquina "Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop." Y así fue como conocí a Mentas Libres por primera vez.

Eso pasó en 2009. Mi error en eso entonces fue no tomar ventaja a todo lo que ofrece Mentas Libres. Cuando fuimos trasladados a todos esos largos lugares, verdaderamente no recuerdo que existía una organización como Mentas Libre que nos hacía sentir que siempre estaremos cerca de casa con ellos. Entiendo que en verdad, nada se puede hacer solo. Se ocupa mucho de una comunidad que le enseñe a navegar sanamente en la comunidad al igual que en prisión. Mentas Libres hace todo esto con todos sus miembros. En 2019 tuve el privilegio de conocer en persona a unos miembros de Mentas Libres que vinieron a vernos mientras estuve esperando los resultados de mi IRAA. Fue en ese entonces que entendí la importancia de tener una comunidad quien lo ayude y apoye en los momentos de reingresar a la sociedad. Hoy día tengo el privilegio de trabajar por Free Minds hablando con la comunidad. Para mí no solo es una manera de reconstruir mi comunidad, pero también como una manera de sanarme y al mismo tiempo, educar a la comunidad sobre lo que es ser encarcelado. He estado trabajando con ellos por más de 3 años, y he mirado todos los detalles que ofrece Mentas Libres. Lo más resaltante para mí es la importancia que le dan a la comunidad y que sin importar donde estemos, somos parte de una comunidad que nos espera a llegar a casa. Me siento bien ser parte de esta gran comunidad que para mí es como una familia. Desde muy lejos estoy aquí con ustedes, porque soy parte de esta comunidad.

Greetings my people! It is my great hope that at the time you are reading this article, you are in the best physical and mental health. For me it is a pleasure to be in communication with you through these means, knowing everything it means to be behind those walls and wishing to be free.

The topic of this article is "Community." When I realized what this month's theme was, I immediately knew what I wanted to share with you.

Firstly, and to give a little context for those who are here with us for the first time, after having served 25 years in prison, I was given relief under IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act) in 2020. Due to my immigration status, I was deported to my home country, Honduras.

In 1997 the judge gave me a sentence of 35 years to life at the age of 19, I was quickly sent to the maximum security in Lorton known as "the wall." That was at the beginning of that year, by that time we already knew that the Lorton prisons were going to be closed and that they were going to move us to different prisons in the nation. In September of the same year, I was transferred to Youngstown, Ohio. Over 5 hours away from my family. For the rest of my sentence, we were like this, away from everything and everyone. It felt as though we were cast away, forgotten by the world.

There was no other option but to endure that distance. One of the things that always helped me in my caged moments was reading. Books always helped me escape those walls. I reached a stage where it was mandatory to have a good number of books in my possession. I liked doing it because in the federal system, when there was a long "lockdown," reading was what helped me get through those moments. Normally, these confinements bring a general search where they take away everything that is excess or what is not allowed. I don't know why, but on this one occasion, they took all my books and I was left with nothing. The first chance I had, I was asked a friend for something to read. As I told you, reading was mandatory for me, it truly took me outside of those walls. Well, my friend gave me two books along with an envelope that contained several folded pages inside. "Write to them!" he told me, "they will send you books." I will never forget that moment when I looked at that envelope and on the corner it said "Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop." And that's how I met Free Minds for the first time.

That happened in 2009. My mistake then was not taking advantage of everything that Free Minds offers. When we were transferred to all those far away places, I truly do not remember that there was any organization like Free Minds that made us feel as if we will always be close to home with them. I understand that truly, nothing can be done alone. A community that teaches us how to navigate healthily in the community as well as in prison. Free Minds does all this with all its members. In 2019, I had the privilege of meeting some members of Free Minds in person when they came to see us while I was waiting for the results of my IRAA. It was then that I understood the importance of having a community to help and support you in the moments of re-entering society. Today I have the privilege of working for Free Minds speaking with the community. For me it is not only a way to rebuild my community, but also a way to heal myself and at the same time, educating the community about what it is like to be incarcerated. I have been working with them for over 3 years, and I have looked at all the details that Free Minds offers. The most important thing for me is the importance they give to the community and that no matter where we are, we are part of a community that is waiting for us to come home. It feels good to be part of this great community that for me is like a family. From afar I am here with you, because I am part of this community.

MEET NED: PEER SUPPORTER

By Neely

When Free Minds member Ned was released after being incarcerated for 28 years, he immediately connected with us through our Reentry Book Club. Ned was committed to providing for his family and reciprocating the care he received from them while he was incarcerated. He dreamed of obtaining his CDL and becoming a bus driver. Ned worked with us to achieve his goal, and he was shortly hired by a transportation company to be a bus driver. Soon after he started, a passenger was assaulted by another passenger and succumbed to his wounds while Ned was driving. The extreme trauma had an immense impact on Ned, making it difficult to continue the job he had studied and worked so hard to have. It was also hard for him to enjoy hobbies, such as coaching youth football, which he had been so excited to take part in again. Ned began attending therapy sessions with a licensed clinical therapist. He also participated in our Peer Support Training Program, a 12-week program that equips participants with the knowledge and skills to provide social emotional support to their fellow peers.

Ned was actively engaged throughout the Peer Support Training Program cohort, and went on to be the student speaker at the graduation. He gave a moving speech about the importance he felt in being able to move forward and give back to his peers. By sharing his own experiences, Ned helped his peers reflect on their own traumas and discover healthy coping mechanisms needed to start their own healing journeys. In 2024, Ned became a Peer Supporter with Free Minds, providing support to members newly home with one-on-one emotional wellness support. Ned connects with his partners weekly, working with them to navigate stressors and conflicts that arise in their transition home. He recently shared why he is a Peer Supporter: *"I'm so grateful for how receptive people were to me when I came home. It made it so much easier for me, so I want to be part of that for others when they come home."*

Ned is passionate about giving back, and has mentored incarcerated youth at one of DC's youth facilities. He now has a job in a county government position as a large equipment operator. Ned also gives back through his active participation in our weekly reading and writing workshop, "The Build Up." He regularly participates in our biweekly IRAA support group, designed specifically to address the unique needs and experiences of adults reentering society after being incarcerated as youth and young adults. Ned is a role model to his fellow peers, and is very vocal about the importance of seeking professional help for mental health through therapy. Thank you Ned for everything you do!

CONNECT ON CORRLINKS *By Aneka*

If you have access to Corrlinks or Getting Out, you can now send in your submissions and receive writing prompts and other *Connect* related updates via Corrlinks or Getting Out. Members without Corrlinks and Getting Out access can continue to send in *Connect* submissions via mail. New email requests are responded to once a week. **This email correspondence will be solely for the purpose of exchanging *Connect* related information. We will not respond to emails that are not *Connect* related. All personal correspondence will continue to be through mail.**



Free Minds Corrlinks Info:

Corrlinks First Name: Free Minds

Corrlinks Last Name: Connect

Corrlinks Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org

Free Minds Getting Out Info:

Getting Out First Name: Connect

Getting Out Last Name: Free Minds

Getting Out Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org

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

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

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

REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

What's Good Family!

I hope that you have crossed most of your 2024 goals off of the list now that we are nearing the end of the year (hint, hint, read more books maybe). Okay now that I have delivered my real message (read more books) let's chop it up about this month's theme, Community! Community can mean different things to different people, however, the one thing that I think that we all can agree on is that we all need it. Community gives us a sense of security, belonging, purpose, identity and humanity. Also, oftentimes, there are communities within communities, those tight intimate circles and relationships built amongst families, friends, neighbors and support network organizations (hmm what organizations with the initials FM come to mind?).

Community is where our identities are shaped outside of our households. While we traditionally think of a community as the people in a given geographical location, the community can really refer to any group sharing something in common like attributes of the people in it or by the strength of the connections among them. Typically, a community is a group of people who are alike in some way, who feel some sense of belonging or interpersonal connection, and I think that is beautiful because it's in our nature to live in groups, to have meaningful connections.

Communities are also about giving and taking; the more we do that, the more we share with others and the more likely meaningful relationships are built. Those meaningful and lasting relationships can develop among like-minded people if they share common interests, shared goals, or experiences. Togetherness is so important for our experience as humans. We're social creatures; we need interaction with other people and that is why we are drawn to communities. Being in communities can give us a deeper sense of that togetherness.

And lastly, one very important benefit of community is that it can help fight feelings of hopelessness and give us the certainty that we are safe when surrounded by our community.

Now, time to give you some helpful information about some community based organizations here in the city that are highly beneficial!

Broken Chains Inc.

202-372-6548

brokenchainsdc@gmail.com

1639 Fort Davis Place, SE

Washington DC, 20020

Broken Chains is a nonprofit organization serving men, women and youth who have been impacted by the justice system, particularly those citizens who have been recently released from prison and returning home to the District of Columbia. Their mission is to educate and empower returning citizens by facilitating access to vital resources and services such as food, clothing, housing, counseling, transportation and employment assistance which are amongst the most critical needs upon returning to society. Additionally, Broken Chains hosts various trainings and workshops throughout the year to educate and empower returning citizens with the necessary skills to obtain employment as well as provide job referrals and placement opportunities. Broken Chains wants to spread their message of hope and compassion and believe that a single action can make a difference in the community, and collectively we can greatly impact the world.

Until we *Connect* again!

- Ms. Keela

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

with Neely

We are excited to share that our next Books Across the Miles selection is *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* by Wes Moore, who is currently serving as the Governor of Maryland (and once visited our book club at the DC Jail!). In December 2000, the Baltimore *Sun* ran a small piece about Wes Moore, a local student who had just received a Rhodes Scholarship. The same paper also ran a series of articles about four young men suspected of killing a police officer in a botched armed robbery. One was named Wes Moore. After following the story, Wes wrote a letter to the "other" Wes, now convicted of murder and serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole. Wes quickly discovered that the other Wes had a childhood not unlike his own, and that they were more alike than different. We are eager to hear your thoughts about the book. Here are some discussion questions to guide you:



1. What are some of the main similarities between both Wes's childhoods? What are some of the main differences?

2. On p. 44, Wes describes "neutral grounds" in his neighborhood in the Bronx as a meeting place where every young man from the community could unite as neighbors (such as the basketball court in his neighborhood). Was there a neutral ground in your childhood neighborhood? How would you describe it?

3. What impact does fatherhood play in the lives of both Wes's? How do the absence of their fathers and the differences in the reasons for their absences affect them?

4. How did you feel when looking at the early childhood photos of both Wes's? Did you notice any similarities and/or differences between the photos?

5. On one of his visits to the prison, Wes wonders how far back in time they would have to go for the other Wes to be innocent again. How far back do you think they would have to go? What was the turning point in the other Wes's life?

Remember to vote for our next book in the book ballot on page 42!

First choice: _____

Second choice: _____

Name _____ Date _____

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: THE FUTURE (VOLUME 14, ISSUE 1)

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on **the Future**. We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 14, Issue 2 will be exploring the theme of **Goals**.

(1)

Dream Home: Picture your ideal home in the future. What does it look like? What's around it? Describe the things that make it special.

(2)

Imagine it's the year 3050. Describe what your perfect day looks like. What's different? What's exciting?

(3)

Think of a place you'd love to visit someday, real or imaginary. Write a poem or story about the adventure you'd have there.

(4)

Picture a job you'd love to have in the future. What would you do every day, and why would it be exciting?

(5)

Think of a future celebration—a birthday, holiday, or personal achievement. Who's there? What are you celebrating, and how?

MEDITATION: EMBRACING THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

By Kelli

Community is crucial. Don't get me wrong.. I love my solitude... sitting alone in the quiet of my own thoughts for some part of each day. But the bottom line is, I rely heavily on community for my overall well-being. And I consider you all—every one of you—as a vital part of that community. It might be an old analogy, but I like to think of community as a cozy and gorgeous quilt. Each piece (or quilt square) is beautifully unique, and when any individual is missing, the quilt is not whole... So, let's join together for a meditation to contemplate, embrace and appreciate our whole community.

If you can find a fellow meditator in your midst, you can take turns reading this script aloud to each other. If nobody is available at this moment, no worries. Just read through it once or twice and then close your eyes and reflect upon what you've read.

Start by finding a comfortable position where your body feels supported, whether you're sitting or lying down. Gently close your eyes and take a deep breath in. Allow your breath to fill your lungs, expanding your belly, and then exhale slowly, releasing any tension. Let your breathing return to a natural, easy rhythm. Let go of any distractions or worries from your day. This time is for you, for your well-being, and for exploring the power of community.

As you breathe, gently bring your awareness to your heart, to the space in the middle of your chest. Imagine your heart as a soft light, glowing gently. This light represents your unique energy, your essence, your connection to your own being. With each inhale, allow this light to grow brighter and warmer, expanding throughout your chest. With each exhale, feel any tension or discomfort melt away.

As this warmth spreads, repeat to yourself: ***I am worthy of love and belonging.*** Allow this affirmation to settle into your heart, like a seed planted deeply within.

Now, with your heart open, begin to imagine this light expanding beyond your own body. Imagine it reaching out, gently connecting to others. Visualize this warm light extending to those who are near you in your life: family, friends, neighbors... See this light forming invisible threads that bind you to each person. With each person, these threads weave together, creating a web of shared energy, of belonging, of mutual care and support.

As you see this web of connection growing, remember that community is not just about proximity, but about the bonds we

share. Even though you are currently incarcerated, you are still connected. Imagine the feeling of being supported, of being seen and understood by those around you. Feel how it feels to give and receive kindness, to be part of something greater than yourself.

In this moment, know that you are not alone. You are part of a vast, interconnected whole. There are people who care for you, and people who you care for. In this web of life, you are a vital thread. You are needed, seen, heard and loved.

Take a deep breath in, and as you exhale, release any feelings of isolation or separation. Trust that even when you feel distant, even when you feel alone, you are always connected to the whole, to the light and pulse of life that shines and flows through all of us.

Now, consider your role in the community. Each of us contributes something unique. What is your gift to share with others? How do you bring your light into the collective? It could be your compassion, your creativity, your ability to listen, or your strength in times of difficulty. Whatever it is, your contribution is valuable.

As you reflect on your gifts, take a moment to appreciate them. Without you, this community would not be the same. You matter. Your presence matters. Feel the gratitude for your own unique contribution and for the ways others bring their gifts into the world as well.

Know that there is no one person who can do everything alone. We are meant to walk together, supporting each other, sharing the load. And when we come together, the possibilities are limitless.

As you begin to bring your awareness back to the present moment, take a deep breath in, and slowly exhale. Feel the ground beneath you, supporting you once again. Notice the rhythm of your breath as it gently moves in and out.

May you continue to embrace the richness of living in community, where love, compassion, and belonging can grow, nourish, and uplift all.

Be well and remember—***YOU*** are a vital part of ***US***, and together, we are stronger.



DC PHOTOS *By Aneka*

As requested by our readers



Anacostia Community Museum



Libby & My Vintage Shop in Union Market in NOMA



Fort Stanton Recreation Center in SE



Horton's Kids Nonprofit in SE located in the former The New United Baptist Church

DC PHOTOS *By Aneka*

As requested by our readers



Nam's Market aka "The Blue Store" located on the corner of W & Chester in SE



Unity Health Care Clinic Located on Galen St in SE



Robots delivering food all over the George Mason University campus. Students order from a vendor on the campus and food is carried in these devices.

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!

PAYING IT FORWARD: EMPOWER DC By Kelli

The Power of Community: As demonstrated by Empower DC, a local community organizing group

"Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much." – Helen Keller

"If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." – African Proverb

The word "community" just sounds like a good thing. Sure, we all know that connecting with others as a group with common values and goals feels warm and fuzzy. But did you know it can also unleash superpowers? Individuals joining together as a community for a cause has been at the core of all the most positive changes in our history. Just think of the people who came together for the Montgomery bus boycott and the March on Washington... events that started small but led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Or the women's suffrage movement beginning with protests and hunger strikes that led to (white*) women finally gaining the right to vote in America in 1920. Or the anti-apartheid movement that dismantled South Africa's system of state-sanctioned segregation and discrimination. All these movements started with a small group of like-minded people seeing a problem and joining together. Their success shows how people, when united in purpose as a community, can bring about meaningful and lasting change.

This can happen on a small scale or on a large scale. We all know that there are plenty of problems and injustices occurring right here at home in Washington, DC. Fortunately, there are many groups of people that have joined forces to address these problems as a community.

One of them is **Empower DC**, a grassroots organization that was founded in 2003 and is committed to advancing racial, economic, and environmental justice by empowering residents through community organizing. Their vision is to transform Washington, DC, into a state where human rights are protected, systemic harm is addressed and repaired, and residents—particularly low- and moderate-income Black and brown individuals—are actively involved in the decisions that impact their lives. It sounds lofty, right? But their mobilization and their method are working.

I talked to Parisa, one of the group's founders. She believes in the abundant power of community.

"There are so many examples throughout history of change that was made as a result of community building. It all comes down to relationships. Our ability to build power is based on our ability to build relationships," she says.

Parisa equates the potential to that of the energy created by people coming together to support a sports team. So, imagine the power you might feel coming off a gameday crowd of

63,000-plus Washington Commanders fans at FedEx Field.

"Our goal is to build community in that same way, but instead of using it to support a team, use it in the realm of policy making to effect positive social change," she says.

Empower DC has organized many of the city's residents to do just that. Their efforts center around: environmental justice; housing justice; equitable development; preservation of community history; and racial equity.

A recent victory came after a decades-long fight that began when the city closed the historic Alexander Crummell School in 1970. The school had been a center of community life in Ivy City, a neighborhood founded by and for Black residents in 1873. For



An undated photo of the Alexander Crummell School before its 1970 closing. Photo from the archive of Empower DC.



The Alexander Crummell School in 2024. Photo from the archive of Empower DC.

the last 50 years, the community has had no place for its kids to play, and no green space where its neighbors can come together.

After a 20-year campaign that included defeating a polluting bus depot and later high-cost condos planned to be developed on the site, Empower DC secured approval from DC government to renovate the historic Crummell School and its two-acre site as a community center and park, winning \$35 million in the DC budget to fund the project. The project is currently in the design phase with an expected opening in 2026.

"So many times we were told, 'Oh, the decision has already been made, it's too late.' A lot of people get deterred, but if there is one thing that I've learned, it is that it's never too late," Parisa says. "The critical component is the longevity of keeping up the fight. When you keep up the fight, you outlive the opposition. Eventually, the right thing becomes the only thing!"



An artist's rendering of the planned renovation of the Alexander Crummell School to become a community center and park for the people of the Ivy City neighborhood. From the archive of Empower DC.

The Empower DC community is made up of many types of people, with different incomes, family structures and work history. And while it includes people of all ages, races and backgrounds, a majority are low-income Black and brown people. And when it comes to leadership, Parisa says that it's Black women from the community who tend to step up and take the lead.

Parisa says that one of the biggest challenges they face is that people are often unfamiliar with the concept of community organizing.

"We have to create a new culture," she says. "One of the most powerful tools at our disposal is people's lived experience with these issues. It informs what we do. The information we get comes from the community itself. They can share with us what is really happening because it's happening to them! Their landlords are the ones not making repairs they are obligated by law to make. They are the ones who are being denied housing even though they possess vouchers that declare them legally eligible. They are the ones whose children are breathing in noxious fumes emitted by trucks idling on the streets despite laws against doing so."

So how can we all harness the power of community the way that Empower DC does? How can we disrupt inequitable systems and build collective power to create a more just and equitable society for all? According to Parisa, we start by building relationships. She says there are almost always other people out there that agree with us, people who care about the same issues, but we're just not organized.

"It works at all levels," she says. "It doesn't have to be 100 people. It can be two people. The point is knowing that what you have to say is important and needs to be heard!"

Free Minds gives a big shout out to the Empower DC community for their hard and unwavering fight for the rights of all DC residents. Thank you for paying it forward!

**While the 19th Amendment barred discrimination from voting based on gender, it did not eliminate the state laws and practices that operated to keep Black Americans from the polls via poll taxes and literacy tests. Black women's right to vote was not formally protected by federal law until passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.*

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.

The Valley Green Witch House by Gregory Gathers

Description provided by the author: Wicked Witch Nioami Renee Jones of the District of Columbia has been sent on a mission from Queen Wicked Witch Elanore to capture "all those bad brat kids" who's running in and out of her haunted house, her magnificent castle. Her number one target? Gregory, a 9-year-old kid from the projects of Valley Green in Southeast Washington, D.C. He tries his best to break down the evil culture of the wicked witch's history.





THE WRITE WAY: HOW TO BRING YOUR SETTING TO LIFE

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

By Grace

When you're telling a story, the setting isn't just a backdrop—it's part of the heartbeat of your world. It's what pulls readers in, making them feel like they're walking beside your characters, living and breathing their experiences. If you want to create settings that are vivid, memorable, and deeply connected to your story, here are some practical tips to get you there.

1. Tap Into the Five Senses

Want your setting to feel alive? Bring it to life through the five senses: sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste.

- **Sight:** Don't just list colors—think about light, shadows, and the tiny details that set the mood. Is the room dimly lit with flickering candles? Or is the sunlight bouncing off freshly fallen snow?
- **Sound:** What's in the background? The hum of traffic, the crash of waves, or even the eerie silence of an empty house?
- **Smell:** A scent can instantly ground your reader. Freshly baked bread, salty ocean air, or the metallic tang of rain—it all helps build your world.
- **Touch:** How does the world feel against your character's skin? Is the air humid and sticky, or is a cool breeze cutting through their jacket?
- **Taste:** This one can be sneaky, but it's worth including. Maybe the air tastes salty by the sea, or there's the lingering bitterness of strong coffee in the character's mouth.

2. Match the Mood

Your setting can act like a mirror for your character's emotions. Is your protagonist, or main character lonely? A foggy, empty street can echo that feeling. Are they full of joy? A bright, bustling park can amplify their happiness. Let the world around them reflect what's going on inside.

3. Show, Don't Tell

It's easy to write, "The house was old." But what's more engaging is showing that age through details:

- "The wallpaper peeled back in brittle curls, revealing wooden planks that creaked with every step."
- Action and small observations make the setting come alive without overwhelming your reader with too much explanation.

4. Get Specific

Forget vague descriptions like, "It was a large, pretty garden." Instead, zoom in on unique details:

- "Wildflowers spilled over cracked stone pathways, and a single broken fountain sat crooked, still trying to burble with water."
- These specific details leave lasting impressions and make your setting stand out.

5. Make It Personal

Your character's connection to the setting can tell us so much about them. Maybe the sound of rain on a tin roof reminds them of a peaceful childhood. Or a crowded subway station makes them feel anxious and out of place. These moments tie the setting to your character's inner world and create an emotional bond for the reader.

6. Let the Setting Evolve

Settings don't have to stay the same. As your story unfolds, your characters might see familiar places differently. A cozy bedroom might start to feel suffocating after an argument. A bustling café might seem cold and impersonal when someone's feeling lonely. Let the environment shift as your characters grow.

7. Think Big Picture

Settings can do more than just reflect a moment—they can give your reader a sense of the world your characters live in.

- A street covered in vibrant murals of community leaders says something about pride and culture.
- A factory town with crumbling infrastructure might speak to economic struggles. Use the backdrop to hint at the bigger forces at play in your story.

Final Word

Your setting isn't just scenery—it's an extension of your story. By weaving in the senses it adds details, emotion, and your character's perspective, you can create a world that feels real and resonant, or deep. So set the stage, and let your readers step inside.

Peace and happy writing!

CONVERSATION WITH GEOFF

Howdy Free Minds Family,

I'm very excited to be able to introduce myself in this issue. I joined up with Free Minds this summer as the Operations and Office Manager, which means I do my best to keep things running smoothly and find ways that we can better support our team and keep doing this important work. I've always liked knowing how things work and thinking about how they might work better, and I'm grateful for this opportunity to support Free Minds.

I'm also happy to be able to write this in our Community issue, since community is something I've been thinking about lately. This October my mother flew out from Oregon (where I was born and raised) to visit me here in D.C. and having her around made me think about community, both as groups that we feel part of and individuals to whom we're connected. The places and communities that she's connected to over her life have all helped make her the amazing woman who raised me, but throughout her life, she's also changed communities many times.

I moved to the District in the summer of 2011 and was immediately overwhelmed by the action, chaos and scale of city living. Thankfully, I found a good job and made wonderful friends and my community grew. I got to know my neighbors and the folks at the corner store and my community grew again. As I've lived here and learned more about the city I've felt my sense of community grow and develop. I've spent a beautiful afternoon in Malcolm X Park, walked the Metro tunnels, and found so many wonderful and weird places in this city. Though I'll never

be a local, I love this city and I'm so happy to be able to live in this unique place.

If I ever leave the DMV I know that I'll carry DC with me, and I know that because I still carry Oregon in my heart. My friends and family, the places and experiences that I loved there... all still with me, but I also have room for more. Community, for me, isn't about cutting off what's outside, it's about including what's in. Though I've worked at organizations dedicated to legal reform, the opportunity to directly address some of the harm done to my community is a part of why I joined Free Minds, and I've felt honored to meet and work with the incredible community that Free Minds has gathered.

My mother and I attended a staged reading of the play *REND*, by incarcerated playwright Kenneth, and felt really inspired by scenes describing the solidarity and camaraderie of the men on death row. I thought, if we can form community with each other even in such a terrible, dehumanizing, isolating place, then surely community must be a force of incredible power. Since then I've been thinking of community more like a web—perhaps our community spreads out from us to all the people and places that mean something to us, and perhaps by sharing in his words we grew Kenneth's community that night.

Well, I've digressed a bit from the standard introduction but I suppose that tells you something about me too! At any rate, I'm very pleased to have had such a warm welcome to the Free Minds community and I can't wait to make more connections with all the rest of you.

IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

DEEP DIVE: THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

The United States is a representative democracy in which citizens elect the people who represent them, and those officials are entrusted to act in the best interests of those people. On most levels of government—whether it's a mayor or governor or a member of Congress—this is done with elections by popular vote, meaning the person who gets the most total votes is the victor.

But there is an exception for the top job in politics, which is of course the office of President of the United States. For this office, we use what is called an Electoral College to determine the winner. First we will explain how it works, then explain why this system was adopted, and describe the arguments some have made for getting rid of it.

There are, at any time, 435 elected members of the House of Representatives, the larger chamber of the U.S. Congress. How many of those members are from each state is actually redetermined periodically by the population statistics in the U.S. Census. So a state might have 10 Representatives and, if its population goes down by enough, end up with nine, or 11 if the population rises enough.

The number of Representatives in a state is also the number of electoral votes awarded to that state in the presidential election process. And thus the more populous a state is, the more Members of Congress and presidential electoral votes they have.

California has the most, with 57 electoral votes. The minimum amount of electoral votes for any state is set at three, so there are lots of states with three. Interestingly, Washington, D.C. is the one exception in this process: it is not a state, has no voting members of Congress, but it has three electoral votes.

So why is it called the Electoral College? Because each electoral vote won by a candidate is given to an actual human being called an Elector, who then travels to that nation's capital in December to record their vote. And when they get together, that is the Electoral College.

In nearly all the states, the presidential candidate who gets the most votes wins all that state's electors. So if a candidate gets 51% of the votes in a state, they still get 100% of the electors. Maine and Nebraska are the only exceptions, where the total vote in certain parts of the state dictate a subset of the overall electoral votes.

You might have heard people on the news speculate about a candidate's "path to 270." That is because the candidate who reaches or exceeds this number has secured the majority of the electoral votes available, and has thus won the presidential election.

The motivation of the framers in devising this college was that they did not totally trust the public to not be misled by some truly awful candidate. So the idea was that the people would vote, and the state legislature would appoint electors who were well-educated to carry out the process.

Over time, all states have shifted to a situation where electors are pledged to a candidate, and it is all but certain that they will select the candidate from the party that appointed them to be an elector. In 1833, Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story lamented that "it is notorious, that the electors are now chosen wholly with reference to particular candidates, and are silently pledged to vote for them... Nothing is left to the electors after their choice, but to register votes, which are already pledged; and an exercise of an independent judgment would be treated, as a political usurpation, dishonorable to the individual, and a fraud upon his constituents."

But there is a present-day function of the Electoral College: to ensure that the states with very few people would have at least a proportionate amount of influence on who was chosen to lead the nation. For example, Vermont and its population of about 650,000 have three electoral votes, which might seem very insignificant. But the proportion of electoral votes belonging to Vermont far exceeds the proportion of total potential voters who vote there.

There have been 59 presidential elections in United States history, won by a total of 42 people. In 54 of those elections, the person who won the most electoral votes also won the most overall votes. Two of the instances where that did not happen were fairly recent: Al Gore won the popular vote and lost to George W. Bush in 2000, and Hillary Clinton won the popular vote but lost to Donald Trump in 2016.

Public opinion polling routinely shows that people favor the switch to a national popular vote, and critics of the electoral college system have lodged a number of complaints about it. The disproportionate power held by less populous states is one; another is that the process tends to make the entire presidential election about wooing undecided voters in so-called "swing states," where there isn't a clear bend towards the Republican or Democratic party. This means candidates for president, once they have been nominated by their party, are fairly free to ignore the many voters who reside in a state that is certainly going to award its electors to one party or another.

The simplest explanation for why we use this process, despite public opinion against it, is that this is what the founders of the nation came up with and put into the U.S. Constitution. And things in the Constitution are very hard to change or get rid of. Two-thirds of both the House of Representatives and

IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

the Senate must approve the amendment, and then three-fourths of states must ratify the amendment.

To get past that first hurdle, you would need a significant fraction of Congress from small states to vote in a way that lowered the influence of their own voters in presidential elections. And then, you'd actually need the voters from some of those states to ratify the change in a statewide election.

WORLD

In 1971, Hafez al-Assad became the president of Syria, representing the nation's Ba'ath Party. It became a family business of sorts; upon his death in 2000, he was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad.



Hafez al-Assad

The Assad regime came to a shocking end in December as rebel factions overtook Damascus, the capital city of the nation of 23 million. Al-Assad has stepped down as president and is now living with his family in Moscow, as Russia has granted him asylum.

The end of the regime could be described as a development that occurred very slowly and then all at once. The country has been mired in civil war since 2011, during which time al-Assad has come under intense criticism for his indiscriminate use of bombings, chemical weapons and violence to maintain power. One thing that kept him in power: the fractured nature of rebellion in Syria, where different groups with the same goal of removing al-Assad were also fighting each other. The Southern Operations Room, an alliance of the nation's largest rebel groups, was formed in December and quickly rolled to victory.

Will the government that replaces the al-Assad regime be a better one for the people of Syria? Only time will tell.

NATION

On November 5, Donald Trump was elected to serve a second term as president of the United States of America. He is the first person since Grover Cleveland to win non-consecutive elections to the presidency. Trump won 312 electoral votes, six more than Biden did in unseating him four years ago.



President Donald Trump

Trump will enter his second term with the full trifecta of political power. Republicans hold the White House, the majority in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, and in the U.S Supreme Court, six of the nine justices are jurists appointed by Republican presidents. Among Trump's stated intentions for this term: deporting millions of undocumented people, cutting taxes, and negotiating an end to the War in Ukraine.

SCIENCE

2024 officially has become the hottest year on record, exceeding 2023 for the dubious top spot. This has contributed to extreme weather such as droughts in South America, following in Nepal and Europe, and deadly heat waves in Mexico, Saudi Arabia and Mali. In the United States, Hurricanes Beryl and Helene laid waste to swaths of Southern states like North Carolina and Georgia, with a death toll that eclipsed 300.

SPORTS



Washington Commanders and the Detroit Lions

In the last edition we wondered aloud whether Jayden Daniels would be "The Savior" of the long-downtrodden Washington Commanders? It is safe to say that he's continued to show that promise. The team is 8-5, sits in second place in the NFC East, and is currently on track to appear in its first playoff game since 2020. Daniels is the main reason for the turnaround: with several games left he is nearing the 3,000-yard mark and is completing 70% of his passes, virtually unheard of for a rookie pass thrower.

The Commanders would face some steep competition in the NFC were they to make the playoffs. The Detroit Lions are the favorite to win it all right now, and sit atop the NFC at 12-1. Just below them: the Philadelphia Eagles and Minnesota Vikings, both at 11-2. In the AFC, the Kansas City Chiefs, Pittsburgh Steelers and Buffalo Bills are all widely considered the top contenders to move in the playoffs.

Since our last update, the New York Liberty have secured their first WNBA championship, led by the play of Breanna Stewart and Jonquel Jones. And the Los Angeles Dodgers stormed through the Major League playoffs before beating the New York Yankees 4-1 in the World Series.

And in the NWSL, the Washington Spirit (DC's women's soccer team) returned to the championship for the first time since they won it in 2021. They faced off against top-ranked Orlando Pride, led by Brazilian superstar Marta (6-time FIFA World Player of the Year). In a hard-fought match, the Pride beat the Spirit 1-0 with a goal from Zambian striker Barbara Banda, claiming their first championship title. For DC soccer fans, there is much to look forward to, as they had a record-breaking season with an exceptional rookie class who should only continue to improve in the next season.



CLARENCE, FORMERLY INCARCERATED ACTOR IN ACCLAIMED FILM, TALKS IMPACT OF THE ARTS

Interview by Rebecca

Clarence “Divine Eye” Maclin, costar of the critically acclaimed 2024 film *Sing Sing* about a theater group of incarcerated men, has traveled an unconventional path to acting on the silver screen. Self-described as “troubled,” Clarence found himself serving a 17-year prison sentence, but his life trajectory changed when he encountered a unique New York-based nonprofit organization, Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA). RTA operates in 10 maximum and medium-security men’s and women’s New York State correctional facilities, and one facility in Jamestown, California and offers programming that “helps people in prison develop critical life skills through the arts, modeling an approach to the justice system based on human dignity rather than punishment” (Source: RTA, 2024). Clarence was deeply impacted by the freedom he found through artistic expression and has been able to help others experience that same freedom, both as a part of the in-facility RTA leadership team, and, after his release, as a consultant with RTA. Years after his first encounter with RTA, Maclin was approached about making a film focused on this transformative program. In late August, Rebecca had the honor to speak with Clarence to learn more about him and his remarkable journey.

What made you join Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA)?

My facility had shut the yard down and we had to go to the chapel where RTA had put on a play. I knew about the RTA program, however, what I didn’t know was that the men that were on the stage were actual incarcerated men. Once I saw the creation, the things that they were doing, the expressions and the connectedness of how that story was being played out to the audience, and how the audience responded, it kind of rekindled the artist in me. When I was younger, I used to draw a lot. I used to sculpt and do jigsaw puzzles. All of these things were artistic to me, and I used to love doing them. But those things weren’t what cool kids were doing so I kind of suppressed that side of me. That night when I was sitting in that auditorium watching this play, it rekindled that artistic side of me and I wanted to be a part of the program. You had to stay out of trouble for a whole year to be a part of the Rehabilitation Through the Arts program and I was getting into trouble a lot. But I did it. I did the whole year without getting into any trouble. I got into the program, and then I got my first chance to be in a play. It was called Stratford’s Decision, and it was a play written by incarcerated individuals. I had absolutely no lines. I’m up on stage and all I get to do is posture. Posture and gesture. I must have been pretty good at posturing because the director said “we got to give you some lines.” So I had two lines and got bit by the bug.

What would you say to our members who are interested in getting involved in the arts, but are worried it could negatively impact their reputation?

I would say pursue your heart. Pursue your dream. This is who you are. You’re artistic. You were built to create. You were built to express. When you suppress it within your own self, you’re denying your own nature and you become something else that you’re not. So embrace who you are.



Scenes from the film *Sing Sing*.

When you were getting ready for release, what was your plan for when you got home?

I had astronomical plans. I thought I was the next big thing. But, you know, pursuing acting and providing groceries in the refrigerator at the same time rarely goes together. One of them had to take precedence over the other. I had to get my life in order. I still had goals to complete. I needed six more classes for my bachelor's degree in behavioral science so I had to get that done. And I did that. I had to get a job. I did that. I began working with at-risk teens to try to prevent them from going through the things that I went through. I found that I have a knack for that. I also have communication skills that allow me to be heard by them and allow me to hear them so I used that. A lot of the things that I learned in RTA, I used to communicate with the youth. And then Clint [Bentley, co-writer/producer of *Sing Sing*] and Greg [Kwedar, director/co-writer of *Sing Sing*] got in touch with RTA about doing a movie. If things are meant for you, I believe they'll find you as long as you stay doing what you're supposed to do.

What was something that shocked you when you came home?

Man, Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck were on 42nd Street. (laughs) 42nd Street was a very different place when I left. There was no Mickey Mouse running around or none of that. It was dangerous.

What was it like for you getting to create the film *Sing Sing*?

Man, it was such a blast. Greg and Clint were amazing from

the time we met them. It was easy to tell that they were very genuine about preserving the integrity of the Rehabilitation Through the Arts program and ensuring that we wouldn't be exploited. That created a bond and a trust. That was the underlying force that drove the whole project, that camaraderie. We know who [actors] Big Colman Domingo, Paul Raci, and these Hollywood producers are. But to have my opinion and point of view have value here is a powerful thing. We all had the same amount of ownership over everything and that created a different community.

I feel like so many films about prison focus on the shock value and the violence, whereas with this film, there was so much focus on people being people engaging with other people and dealing with themselves. Was that something that you were hoping for with this?

Yes, that whole humanistic warmth of brown and Black brothers having to come together. There is a segment of people in every prison, I believe, that are focusing on becoming better human beings. And I think that that's what we wanted to shine a light on, that segment of the population.

What advice would you give to our members who are looking forward to coming home?

Stay true to yourself. Take your time. Don't rush anything. This is still a learning experience. The lesson ain't over yet. (laughs) Just because they open the doors doesn't mean it's over. Don't mean the struggle's over. It's not. Prison was preparation. No matter how much time you did, no matter what experiences you went through inside, it was preparation for this. This is the real world. This is where it counts. Stay true to yourself and rely on your network. Rely on trusted people.

Is there anything else you want to say to our members?

Look around in your circles, you're going to find somebody just like me, somebody that needed a little help, somebody that needed somebody to put some empathy, some hope, some trust. And once you do that with people, you have the power to change the trajectory of their life. And then you have enabled somebody else to go and do it for somebody else. And this is how we get to heal the whole world.

Since the release of Sing Sing, Clarence has been juggling quite a bit. He's actively reading through several scripts that have come his way and continues to heavily promote Sing Sing. He recently attended the San Quentin Prison Film Festival, which was the first film festival inside of a prison. He also attended the Hamptons Film Festival and was the recipient of the Breakthrough Performer Award. He is in the midst of writing a book about his journey called "Successful Steps" which is named after his non-profit organization. Additionally, he's continuing his important work with youth, which remains a significant part of his life.



Sunset over White Sand Beach

AROUND THE WORLD: THE PHILIPPINES *By Julia*

One of my life goals has always been to visit at least six of the seven continents in the world (I'll pass on Antarctica for now). This summer, I crossed one more continent off the list when I set out on a trip that was the farthest I'd ever been from home—literally the other side of the world—to visit a dear friend who now lives in the Philippines, an island nation in Southeast Asia. The Philippines is a large country made up of over 7,000 islands, with a population of over 114 million people (about a third of the United States for comparison). There are over a hundred different languages spoken in the Philippines, but probably the most common language is Tagalog. Fortunately for me, English is also extremely common.

The United States and the Philippines have a complex history, including the Philippine-American War that was fought from 1899-1902, which led to the United States occupying the Philippines as a territory until 1946. I'm far from an expert in this history but have been working on educating myself. If you're interested in learning more about this history, let us know and we can send you a book about it!

Anyway, back to my journey. My friend lives on a small island called Boracay that is 8,710 miles from DC. I took three planes and a boat to get there; including layovers

(time spent in airports or hotels between flights), it took me 37 hours, by far the longest trip I'd ever taken, but it was well worth it. Boracay is a renowned tourist destination that is particularly famous for its beaches. My friend lives about fifty feet from the most popular beach on Boracay: White Sand Beach. The sand is—you guessed it—white, and for some scientific reason that is beyond me, that means it doesn't get hot under the sun. A lot of beaches in the US, the sand gets quite hot and sometimes isn't comfortable to walk on. Not so in Boracay! The water was also the clearest



Cars are not permitted on Boracay except for emergency and municipal vehicles, so most people get around via "e-trike" (the green vehicles you see here), which have 3 wheels and just a few seats to hop in or out of like a taxi.



A boat in the water by the White Sand Beach

ocean water I've ever seen. We could see everything under the water and loved watching small fish swimming around our feet. Much of the town is oriented around the beach as well, so every day (often multiple times a day) we walked up and down this beach to go to the restaurants, cafes, bars, and shops.

I was excited about trying new (to me) cuisine. My friend is a writer, and I have read a fair amount of her writing about food (she grew up in and around her family's restaurant, so that background might have something to do with it!). Readers might remember her article about food writing in Volume 10, Issue 5. All to say, I was excited to try food like sinigang, a hearty soup with a slightly sour tamarind broth, and pandesal, which despite its name ("salt bread" in Spanish), is actually a slightly sweet roll. They did not disappoint!

I was also eager to try a dessert I'd heard about called halo-halo, which means "mixed" in Tagalog. Fitting, because halo-halo combines



A dish called chicken inasal. Fun fact: that little green fruit that looks like a mini-lime is called calamansi. It tastes a bit like a cross between lemon and lime, but it is not related to either!



Halo-halo with purple ube (a kind of sweet yam) ice cream, along with mango, coconut, kidney beans, and honestly I don't remember what the red and green cubes were!

a whole bunch of different foods! It's served cold, usually with crushed ice, although the shop I got mine from was using ice cream as a base.

Boracay is also known for a lot of water-based adventure activities that people can do. Now, after reading about Sofia falling off jet skis on her trip to Puerto Rico (in Volume 13, Issue 3), I decided not to go jet skiing, but I did face my fear of heights by going parasailing and ziplining! To go parasailing, we were strapped to a brightly colored parachute that was then pulled behind a boat. This was a very gentle, almost meditative activity but I still couldn't relax so high above the water! Ziplining was not so meditative, as it involved being strapped to a set of cables and then zipping down them (headfirst!) across a valley. Don't worry, we all made it safely to the other side.



On one of the beaches on Boracay, there were vendors selling fresh buko (coconut juice). They sliced it open right there and handed it to us to drink! Very refreshing under the hot sun.

continued on page 37

DC CULTURE: FALL HOMECOMINGS IN THE DMV

By Sofia

Each fall, colleges across the country often welcome back alumni (graduates from previous years) and bring together current students and other community members to celebrate their homecomings. This year's homecoming was jam-packed in the DMV (DC, Maryland, Virginia) as Howard University, Bowie State University, and the University of Maryland's homecomings all fell during the same week towards the end of October.

Homecoming is always a joyful event meant to conjure school spirit, but is particularly celebratory for HBCUs¹ (Historically Black College and Universities) as they celebrate Black joy and pride. Howard and Bowie are both HBCUs, and their homecoming celebrations highlighted this fact. Although the University of Maryland is not an HBCU, their



A yard sign in DC honoring Howard University's 100th homecoming

homecoming events also served as prideful for the DMV. Alumni for all three schools flooded the DC-area as different celebrations occurred throughout the week, which of course included students and other community members who are local to DC. This year's homecoming season was significant as Howard University celebrated their 100th homecoming. The theme was "Yard of Fame" to highlight the leaders and prominent figures who've walked Howard's halls in year's past, as well as celebrating the future paths to be paved by current students.

Howard's very first homecoming in 1924 was one of the first celebrated by a HBCU, having drawn on examples from Ivy League universities at the time, but adding their own unique style and flair. Homecoming typically



revolves around a school's huge football game, typically played against a rival, and Howard's has been no different. The very first homecoming game was played against the Lincoln University Lions, and this year's 100th homecoming game was no different. Unfortunately the Howard Bisons were defeated by the Lions, but that didn't dampen the week's celebrations in the nation's capital that led up to the game and came later that night.

One of the most famous Howard events during homecoming season is the annual Yardfest, a festival that occurs on the university's Yard with live stage performances featuring a diverse range of top tier artists and entertainment that reflect the Howard



Yardfest at Howard University

diaspora. Yardfest is open to the public and often brings a large number of DC residents to the audience. The yearly celebration often features big names in Black entertainment, including Drake and Wale in past years. This year did not disappoint with up-and-coming artists Coco Jones, Jordan Ward, and Leon Thomas taking the stage. Yardfest is also often regarded for the high-fashion present on the yard with alumni, students, and community members donning their flyest ensembles. In fact, supermodel Anok Yai was discovered while attending festivities for Howard Homecoming.

While not all Howard alumni and students are originally from DC, the weeklong celebration is a mainstay in the DC community, as Howard homecoming participants support the whole DC community, staying in local hotels, dining at local

¹ HBCUs, or Historically Black Colleges and Universities, are defined as schools that were accredited and established before 1964, and whose principal mission was education for Black Americans.

restaurants, and supporting other businesses. Many restaurants, nightclubs, event venues, and other local businesses often hold celebratory events or deals in the spirit of homecoming. DC locals are also encouraged and welcome to celebrate with the famous local HBCU community.

Although Bowie State and the University of Maryland aren't in DC, their homecomings also made waves with those local to the area. Bowie State University, an HBCU located in Bowie, Maryland, hosted the Bluefield State Sir Blues for a blowout game that ended in a 54-0 win for the Bowie Bluedogs. The week leading up to the big game featured similar events to those held at Howard, including a step show, talent show, and concert. The Bowie State homecoming concert also featured notable Black performers, including the rapper Cash Cobain, No Cap, and Flow and Friends as opening acts for the famous female rapper JT.

The University of Maryland brought a huge crowd of alumni to the DMV area. For the homecoming game, the Terps brought home a huge victory against the University of Southern California Trojans with a last-minute 29-28 win. Fans rushed the field as the week-long celebration of the school culminated in the nail-biting victory. The week leading up to the anticipated match up also featured celebrations and events, including a stand-up comedy show by comedian John Mulaney at the school's Xfinity Center. The school also held a carnival the night before the game.

The DC-area is home to many universities and a thriving Black community, which these three week-long homecomings served as a powerful reminder of. Bowie, Howard, and The University of Maryland have shaped DC in a lot of ways, and DC has shaped these schools in return. These homecomings are fun fall celebrations that bring together a large part of the DC community.

Have any ideas for future editions of the DC Culture column? Write in to let us know!

AROUND THE WORLD *continued from page 35*

The opposite of exploring new heights, we also explored some depths... in this case, the ocean floor! Boracay has a popular activity called "helmet diving," where you put on a big helmet that is connected via long tubing to an oxygen tank on the boat above you, then you descend a ladder into the water to walk on the ocean floor. I think we were about fifteen feet below the surface of the water. Walking along the ocean floor with just this helmet providing oxygen (no scuba suit or anything like that!) felt a bit like what I imagine walking on the surface of the moon might be like. And remember how I said the water was the clearest I'd ever seen? We were walking among these beautiful coral reefs and incredible displays of bright, colorful fish. There was a scuba diver there for our safety who had an underwater camera; check out these clownfish peeking out from the anemone where they make their home! Helmet diving was truly one of the most beautiful things I have ever experienced.

I have to confess, I was a little nervous before I went on this trip. I was anxious about things going wrong with my flights, and worried about what the jet lag would feel like (Boracay is a full 12 hours ahead of DC in its time zone; like right now, I'm writing this at 2 PM on a Friday. In Boracay, it's already Saturday!). And I was a little scared of parasailing and ziplining! But in the end, my week in the Philippines flew by. I hope I get a chance to go back, but in the meantime, I want to keep trying new things and exploring. I hope you all got a little taste of that through this article. Thanks for coming on this journey with me.



Parasailing high above the water



Clownfish in sea anemone

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club



Creatures of Passage **by Morowa Yejidé** *with Neely*



In *Creatures of Passage* by Morowa Yejidé, Nephthys Kinwell is a taxi driver of sorts in DC, grappling with the death of her twin brother, Osiris. Unknown to her, her estranged great-nephew Dash is dealing with his own traumas that have drawn him to the same river where Osiris' body was thrown after his murder. At this river, Dash meets a mysterious figure he calls "River Man," which will end up impacting Nephthys' life in ways she never expected. Here is what FM members had to say about the book.

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

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

AHA: I would have to say a few places in D.C. since being from D.C. and knowing how the Anacostia area is faced with the presence of both damnation and glory, I can picture similar areas where the communities are low class areas that face challenges other areas don't. Damnation and glory are present in these areas by the lack of things provided from education, quality food, resources, and quality living; where the glory is how people stick together providing assistance where needed like throughout this story.

PF: The battlefields are places where damnation and glory are present because in battles/war there is always a winner and a loser. Also, unfortunately, schools in the US are places of damnation and glory. With all the mass shootings, schools became places of damnation. But schools are primarily places of glory as the main goal of schools is graduation.

DVJ: I feel like the presence of the kid was the happiest and saddest. But overall, it's a soft spot for me because there's some truth behind this story because this was once Native land and kids and adults suffered at that same river.

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

AHA: Some of the names and places described throughout the book and how certain parts resemble some elements of a fantasy with language and words like, "crossing," "quadrant," and phrases like, "the wisdom of," and, "the twelve hours of night." I enjoyed the book being in this context due to its mythical elements and bold imagination which you can picture yourself as you read this novel.

DVJ: Not really, I don't like books or movies where little kids get touched on. I mean it happens everyday, but it's just hard for me to cope with, and it kinda messes the book up with the car not needing gas.

PF: In the book Morowa Yedijé uses the words "kingdom" for state, and "fiefdom" for county. It sounds more fantasy than real-life. It didn't bother me as it gives a supernatural dimension to the book as the story talks about spirits and ghosts. There are also a lot of different adjectives used for describing the dawn that adds some mystery: "archipelagic dawn" (p.45), "phosphorous dawn" (p.51), etc. Furthermore, the author also refers a lot to Native American tribes' names.

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

AHA: No, I wouldn't read this column if it existed because I view it as something like a psychic phenomenon that I don't believe in and would not want to know about. I also never knew anyone who has ever had a dream/vision come true.

DVJ: Yes I believe this to be true because I see people or things and say this or that and it becomes just that.

PF: As I am very curious I think I would read such a column. But on the other hand, if this column was talking about me or people I know, I am not sure I would like to know what will happen. In the book no names are given in "The Lottery" but the details are often enough to identify somebody. Humans are very ambivalent as they have the curiosity to know the future but the fear of knowing if our last hour is coming. I don't know anybody that has such dreams or visions about the future but I was interested in Nostradamus in the past.

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

AHA: That it can only heighten your desire for even more revenge, since it doesn't solve the problem you thought it would by seeking revenge in the first place towards those who harmed you. So her message, to me, is clear to see how it made Osiris even more angry, not making him feel satisfied.

PF: Revenge doesn't fix the past. Forgiving and love are the true values that make us spiritually grow and feel good. It doesn't mean that some people don't deserve to be punished, but it's not our role to judge others, it's the job of the Highest Spirit, whatever we call it (God, Buddha, etc.). When I was reading this book, I was thinking that the title could also be "Broken Souls."

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

AHA: By caring for them and giving children support by listening to them whenever they are trying to tell you something and noticing their behavior. Also checking in with them often to let them know they can come talk to you about anything, never hesitating to do so thinking you won't be believed. Some children won't open up, thinking they won't be believed so they need to feel comfortable and change this narrative knowing we are trusted and there as we should be.

PF: Young children usually don't lie about abuse. They cannot imagine these kinds of stories and their details, except under the influence of an adult that seeks revenge. These kinds of stories have to be cautiously treated because they're impacting people's lives, especially in the case of wrongful accusations. It's a delicate matter but we should make children comfortable to talk in a safe environment. Developing confidence and self-esteem in children is important. Also we should teach them how adults should respectfully treat them, and what behaviors are not acceptable or not "normal."

DVJ: By hearing them out. But mainly watching their mood because things affect people in different ways but the way ones act after that is always life damaging.

DC PHOTOS *By Aneka*

As requested by our readers



Shops in Union Market in NOMA



Malcolm X Park in Winter

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!

CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- ★ AMC, AA, MFO, and SD graduated from the MORCA/Georgetown Paralegal Program.
- ★ ANB graduated college.
- ★ ABC became a Peer Success Program mentor.
- ★ AEC, DEB, and CM are the newest BreakFree Fellows.
- ★ ET, JOS, LA, and RO passed their learner's permit test.
- ★ DBU and KTA are currently in the READY Center job training program.
- ★ DJ completed his Minister certification from a Theologian University.
- ★ HC participated in the DC Jail 2nd annual Debate Team match alongside SH, IM and NC who were enthusiastic members of the team. HC received a special recognition from the judges for being the MVP of his team.
- ★ IS completed a HVAC V7 program.
- ★ JA finished a vocational class on building trades and plans to take culinary arts next year.
- ★ VS participating in the DC Central Kitchen training program.
- ★ XL is teaching a class at his facility called How to Build Wealth.

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!

WHAT WE'RE READING

with Neely

Have you recently read a book that left an impression on you, positive or negative? 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."

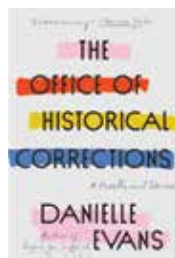
- **MC: *Symptoms of Being Human* by Jeff Garvin**

It is very rare that I find a book in this prison's library that I like so much I cannot put it down. But I recently found such a book. It is *Symptoms of Being Human* by Jeff Garvin. This is a great book about a gender fluid teenager trying to survive in a public high school outside LA. On the advice of a therapist, the teenager, Riley—whose birth gender is never revealed—starts a blog to help other teenagers in the LGBTQIA+ community. As a result, Riley makes friends and enemies, including an online stalker whose threats hit too close to home. This book opened my eyes to struggles I didn't know people faced. Before I read it, I didn't even know gender fluidity was a thing. But I applauded Riley's tenacity of spirit, refusing to give up who she/he/they were just to conform to what society, and the kids at school, said she/he/they should be. As a cisgender bisexual male, or hey, just as me, I highly recommend this book to anyone able to find a copy.



- **RH: *Let's Get Free: A Hip-Hop Theory of Justice* by Paul Butler**

This book starts from a courtroom setting with Paul Butler: a prosecutor willfully engaged to convicting a prostitute in Washington, DC's Superior Court. Detroit, Paul Butler's neighbor, accuses Paul Butler of assault: resulting in Paul Butler being found not guilty. Paul Butler believes he was innocent, although his readers might not believe him, which is why he gives his life story as a presentation of his 'record.' As Paul Butler persuades us, he shares knowledge of racial incongruity—giving the police authority in most states to stop you in a place where they don't normally see you. However, I am not fond of this book because of sympathy for a prosecutor who once went to trial. I am more committed to understanding the views of the criminal justice system and how it relates to the mass incarceration of races and the theories Paul Butler tells us that suggest a reduction of the \$60 billion being spent to build new prisons in every state and the crime reduction of the 2.3 million prisoners currently in prison.



- **Sofia: *They Called Me a Lioness: A Palestinian Girl's Fight for Freedom* by Ahed Tamimi and Dena Takruri**

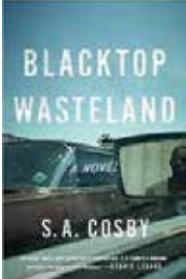

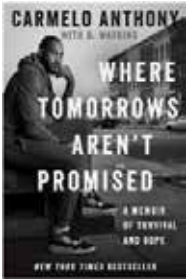
I recently finished reading this incredibly moving memoir from Palestinian activist Ahed Tamimi. Tamimi was imprisoned by Israeli forces at the age of sixteen after a confrontation that was seen around the world with Israeli soldiers in her small West Bank village of Nabi Saleh. Tamimi and Takruri describe the horrors Tamimi has faced while being targeted by the Israeli criminal legal system as a teenage girl. They also detail the courage and strength she and fellow activists have shown throughout Palestinian history, including her own relatives. Tamimi also connects the struggle of the Palestinian people to the struggles and acts of resistance of marginalized people around the world. I learned so much more about the history of Palestine and their resistance against the Israeli occupation through Tamimi's story. I also learned about who Tamimi is as a person trying to navigate coming into adulthood, but having to face so much living and resisting under occupation, all while she deals with school, friendships, personal aspirations, and family.

- **Julia: *The Office of Historical Corrections* by Danielle Evans**

I just started reading *The Office of Historical Corrections* by Danielle Evans. It's a book of short stories, and I'm only on the second story, so I don't know too much about it yet, but I really enjoyed the first story in the book! That one was about a woman dealing with her mother's terminal cancer, and her own fears about the dangers that might lurk in her own body. I really liked this author's first book, *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self*, so I'm looking forward to reading the rest of this one!

BOOK BALLOT

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

1		<p><i>Blacktop Wasteland</i> by S.A. Cosby [Mystery]</p> <p>Beauregard “Bug” Montage left his notorious past as the East Coast’s best known wheelman in exchange for becoming a loving father and husband and a hardworking mechanic. When his perfectly cultivated new life begins to crumble, he finds himself turning back to a life of blood and bullets. An exciting opportunity is presented to him, and Bug can’t resist getting back in the driver’s seat. Haunted by the ghost of his infamous past and responsible for his present role as a father, Bug must find a way to navigate his new life.</p>
2		<p><i>The Light We Carry: Overcoming in Uncertain Times</i> by Michelle Obama [Non-fiction]</p> <p>Through a series of stories and reflections on change, challenge, and power, Michelle Obama offers a fresh perspective on how we can build up others and the wider world around us by discovering deeper truths and new pathways for progress. Sharing her experience as a mother, daughter, wife, friend, and First Lady, she captures what is needed to successfully adapt to change and overcome obstacles. Through her wisdom and humor, she encourages listeners to work through their fears and find strength in community.</p>
3		<p><i>Where Tomorrows Aren't Promised: A Memoir of Survival and Hope</i> by Carmelo Anthony [Memoir]</p> <p>In his memoir, professional basketball player Carmelo Anthony shares his journey from growing up in the Brooklyn projects to becoming a champion on the world stage. Navigating an education system that ignored and criticized him while also dealing with the untimely deaths of loved ones, Carmelo struggled to survive emotionally and physically. With the guidance of family and mentors in both the streets and on the court, he found the endurance to pursue his dreams. His story is one of strength and determination, and the tale of a kid who defied a world of violence and poverty to make it big.</p>

4		<p><i>Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in her Head: Poems</i> by Warsan Shire [Poetry]</p> <p>In her first full-length poetry collection, Warsan Shire shares the story of a young girl forced to make her own way into womanhood. Her poetry draws on the experiences of immigrants, mothers, daughters, Black women, and teenage girls through the worlds of perfume, jasmine, blood, and music. This collection is a showcase and celebration of women's resilience and survival.</p>
5		<p><i>Letters to the Sons of Society: A Father's Invitation to Love, Honesty, and Freedom</i> by Shaka Senghor [Self-help]</p> <p>Shaka Senghor knows what it is like to raise a child behind bars, with his first son being born shortly after he was incarcerated for second-degree murder. When Senghor came home, he fathered his second son. In this collection of letters written to his two sons, Senghor explores his experiences as a Black man in the United States and unpacks the toxic expectations of masculinity, love, and mental health that are placed on boys from an early age. In a passionate call to fathers and sons, he encourages both to develop positive relationships with each other and other men by seeking healing and addressing mental health.</p>
6		<p><i>Your House Will Pay</i> by Steph Cha [Fiction]</p> <p>1990s Los Angeles is reeling in the aftermath of the police shooting of a Black teenager. Grace, the daughter of Korean-immigrants, is largely sheltered and working long hours in her family's pharmacy. Meanwhile Shawn has dissociated from politics and protests after an act of violence shattered his family years ago. When another shocking crime hits LA, both Grace and Shawn are forced to come to terms with their own histories amidst a city on the brink of experiencing more violence.</p>

FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP

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NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: THE FUTURE

By Julia

Lately, I've been listening to the soundtrack from a musical (yes, I like musicals) about characters from Greek mythology. There's a line in one of the songs from the show that says of one of the characters, who is an artist, "*He could make you see how the world could be/In spite of the way that it is.*" I've been thinking about this idea a lot lately, and the importance of artists (including poets!) in helping us all collectively imagine new futures. For this next issue, we want to hear all about your vision for the future—your own future, or the future for your community, your country, the world! What do you want your life to look like tomorrow, next year, or ten years down the line? What do you want for your children, or for future generations? Like the character in the musical, let us dream big and write about the way the future could be; after all, I'm a firm believer that dreaming is the first step to *achieving*. Let's all take that first step together into a new future!

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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