

April/May/June 2025  
Vol. 14, Issue 2

# Free minds Connect



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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Dear Goal-Oriented Free Minds members,

I hope this issue greets you at just the right time with just the right dose of inspiration and motivation. It sure did for me. After reading it, I have a new set of goals written on my bathroom mirror, fridge, and Free Minds office bulletin board! Let us know if the same energy overcomes you! 😊 A Free Minds member dropped by the office the other day to pick up a book, say hello, and share about his new job (the third one he has – it's a tough economic time out here). I asked him if anything surprised him about his reentry journey and his response was emphatic: "Where do I begin?!" He was joking good-naturedly, but the main gist was that he had spent so much time preparing what he thought was a foolproof reentry plan, and not only did things not go according to plan, they went topsy turvy! He was thoroughly perplexed. He had planned for any unanticipated events but as the famous saying goes, "The best-laid plans ...often go awry!" From the challenges of finding a job with a felony record, to family members experiencing health crises, to his car breaking down...it's been a lot! But he has not given up, and instead has readjusted. He's also leaning on his Free Minds network. Never fear, your Free Minds support team is here!

In this issue, you will read about ways you can expect the unexpected, pivot, and still stay on your desired path. You'll get to know how Free Minds member David, who is home in our reentry program, keeps his goal of helping others top of mind as he embodies one of my favorite sayings from Michelle Obama: "Success isn't about how much money you make; it's about the difference you make in people's lives." As David writes, "Anything that I touch, I want to touch it in a positive light. I want to be able to help whether it's a little or a lot." (page 7)

You'll read about another positive light, Jordan, in our Reentry Profile on page 15 as he explains how art, education, and community have helped him build a vision for his future, from graduating college, going on to Information Technology (IT) training, and pursuing his big dream of becoming a homeowner one day.

If your goals include writing a novel, The Write Way article will be your new roadmap. If you're not sure where to begin, this guide breaks down the writing process into manageable steps.

I love how ER describes the process in his poem "*Seed*," a beautiful metaphor for goal setting. "I'm a seed," he writes, "*Scattered in the winds of uncertainty... I spread my roots. I reach right for the sky*" (page 10). These lines remind us that even in uncertain times, we always have the power to break new ground and rise.

As part of reaching for new sights, you'll go on a trip across the globe in "Around the World: A Short Vacation in Marrakesh, Morocco." Jamilah reminds us that goals need to also include rest, joy, connection to our roots, and imagining new worlds for ourselves. You may be physically grounded right now, but your spirit is logging many air miles on Imagination Airlines!



Now I just need to keep reading all of your letters and poems to keep me on the path to achieving my goals. Because we sure need that group support. That's the essence of Free Minds – cheering each other on. I always remember hearing this quote growing up: "*If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time.*" That is true but I like FM member TG's quote the best: "*Thank you for allowing me to be a passenger on the Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop party bus.*" With this issue, the Free Minds party bus is driving to goal-achieving success!

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: Entrepreneurship

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



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

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

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# FREE MINDS HQ

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

*By Sofia*

## **Free Minds Showcases Members' Art And Poetry At The Kennedy Center**

This past September, the Kennedy Center, the national cultural center of the United States located here in Washington, DC, announced that Free Minds would be one of nine local organizations and independent artists selected for their 2024-2026 Culture Caucus. The Culture Caucus was a 2 year residency and incubation program through the Kennedy Center's Social Impact program for a cohort of individuals and organizations in DC to support and help grow their art, and to help attract and connect with more diverse and local audiences. Our first event, Poetry & Art as Liberation: Stories of Hope and Resilience in the Prison System, was held at the Center's REACH campus in late March and we partnered with the Second Look Project and Beauty Behind Bars. The evening featured visual artwork created by Free Minds members on display around the space and projected on one of the walls during a slideshow that was looping throughout the evening. Members' poetry was also shared on high top tables where we invited guests to leave feedback on the poems that would then be returned to members. The night concluded with powerful spoken word performances by Free Minds Poet Ambassadors Tariq, Gene, Regina, and Damon. Unfortunately, the rest of the Culture Caucus programming, originally set to conclude in 2026, was cut short due to leadership changes at the Kennedy Center (where President Trump recently appointed himself Chair of the Board of Trustees). We are saddened that we won't be able to continue sharing Free Minds members' voices at the Kennedy Center, but grateful we could enjoy this one special evening.

## **Free Minds Members Take the Stage with the Theatre Lab**

Several Free Minds reentry members joined the local performing arts group, Theatre Lab, for their Life Stories program, where they met for 11 weeks to write and perform an original play inspired by their own life journeys. The members titled the one-night-only show "Something We Can Build On" and used theater to share their personal experiences, from their upbringings to incarceration and beyond. The members used skits, comedy, spoken word, and other performative art techniques to empower one another, advocate, educate the community, and challenge stereotypes. It was a fantastic evening and the audience was packed with Free Minds staff, supporters, family members, and members of the broader community.

## **Reentry Coaches Host a Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) Prep Class for Reentry Members**

One of the resources available for reentry members through Free Minds Reentry Book Club is support in obtaining identification, including learner's permits and drivers' licenses. Reentry Coach Jennifer accompanies members weekly as they navigate the sometimes stressful process of taking the learner's permit exam or drivers' license road test. Reentry Coaches Jennifer and Tony joined forces in late April to host another installment of their DMV prep course where members learned different tricks and tips to prepare for their tests. The team also shared the best phone applications (apps) and books to help people study. Perhaps even more importantly, members shared advice and encouragement with one another.

## **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, Luis

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



## FREE MINDS MAILBAG

*We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the November/December Connect Community 2024 and January/February/March Connect The Future 2025.*

**ER:** The Community theme really hit home. With so many Free Minds members displaced all over the globe, the *Connect* is keeping us connected (all pun intended). 😊 I'm grateful to be part of this community. Thank you.

**JY:** I love receiving the *Connects* and seeing the pictures of how the city has changed in the 4 years I have been gone.

**SK:** I always enjoy the various themes. Love the *Connect* 😊 ... It helps me get through these long, dark, dreary days.

**TG:** Thank you for allowing me to be a passenger on the Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop party bus.

**JS:** The issue on the Future was a reminder to me to stay focused on my future. The next issue on Goals put me in the mind state to make sure to not compromise my goals. The issue to come next about Entrepreneurship reminded me of what I wanted to be when I was a kid. All those things together gave me the insight into myself to remember that with every struggle comes the opportunity to grow. With growth comes the opportunity to evolve, and with evolution comes the opportunity to be great.

## QUOTE-I-VATOR

*"I don't focus on what I'm up against. I focus on my goals and I try to ignore the rest."* - Venus Williams, American Tennis Player



Venus Williams

*"Our goals can only be reached through a vehicle of a plan, in which we must fervently believe, and upon which we must vigorously act. There is no other route to success."* - Pablo Picasso, Spanish Painter

*"It starts with myself. I have to believe in myself, set goals for myself, and continue to work for those goals everyday."* - Saquan Barkley, Philadelphia Eagles Football Running Back

*"Goals help you channel your energy into action."* - Les Brown, Motivational Speaker and Former Ohio State Representative

*"If you're climbing the ladder of life, you go rung by rung, one step at a time. Don't look too far up, set your goals high but take one step at a time. Sometimes it doesn't look like you're progressing until you step back and see how high you've really gone."* - Donny Osmond, American Singer and Dancer

*"Find something that you're really interested in doing in your life. Pursue it, set goals, and commit yourself to excellence. Do the best you can."* - Chris Evert, American Former Tennis Player

*"It's all about how you take care of yourself when furthering your life's goals, ambitions, purpose, and whatever you choose - family, career - to maintain a really balanced, whole, healthy outlook."* - Abigail Spencer, American Actress

*"Setting goals is the first step in turning the invisible into the visible."* - Tony Robbins, American Author

# FAMILY TIES: INTERVIEW WITH DAVID

*Interview by Matty*

*Hey Free Minds Family! These days I often find myself thinking about the Mariame Kaba (Author, We Do This Til We Free Us) quote, "hope is a discipline." Goals, to me, represent hope and resilience, and I hope this issue of the Connect can inspire some hope and resilience in you during this time. I was pleased to be able to sit down with FM member David, who recently returned home and was able to tell me about his connection with his family, his hopes for the future, and what "goals" means to him.*

**Matty:** Hi David! Thanks for doing this interview and welcome home. Tell me, how long have you been home now?

**David:** Since January the 21st.

**Matty:** Congratulations. And what role did education, reading, and writing play for you while you were incarcerated?

**David:** Education definitely played a major part in my development as a person and as a man. I was just trying to learn it all on my own – my education was self-taught in the beginning. I toughed it out, started getting comfortable with reading, got myself a dictionary, and started from there. I've been a Free Minds member for 8 years now, maybe 9. Free Minds sent me a lot of books. By the time I became a free man, I could go through a book like it was nothing

**Matty:** How did it impact you to receive personal correspondence from Free Minds while you were incarcerated?

**David:** I was fortunate to have some family members writing to me, but it's still not the same as somebody taking time to write to you that you don't know. Someone taking time out of their day to write to you and get to know you – that does something for you, it means something. There are some guys that don't have that, so you understand the significance of it when you do have it. I've seen plenty of guys that don't have anybody to write them or talk to them. Somebody that doesn't know you from a can of paint, taking time out their day to get to know you – it's a different field than talking to your family. A lot of times you can open up to a person that doesn't even know you. It meant something to me because I know the significance of not having somebody, and I know the significance of having somebody, so I know how much it takes for a person to be able to write to you out of the blue.

**Matty:** Yeah, it's really meaningful. You said you had

family members writing to you over the years – what did correspondence with your family look like while you were incarcerated?

**David:** I have a pretty big family. Yesterday I was actually in Philadelphia seeing my little cousin graduate from medical school. She became a doctor yesterday, and has been writing to me since she was in Kindergarten. I remember her when she was in pre-K, saying, "I'm going to be a pediatrician," in the letter. And I still have those letters, every last one. So yesterday was a monumental moment for my family. I remember when I first met her, when she was seven years old, to now being able to actually see her walk across that stage. She was one of the people that, from the time that she could pick up a pencil, was writing to me. We've been corresponding, as well as her mother and one of my sisters. So I was fortunate to have at least three people in my whole 27 years write, visit, and correspond with me. Like I said, I was one of the fortunate ones, but not everybody experiences that.

**Matty:** Congratulations to your cousin! What does family mean to you now that you're home and you're able to, for example, travel to Philly for your cousin's graduation. What is your relationship with your family looking like now?

**David:** It just keeps getting better and better. The older you get and the more mature you get, the more significant you realize it is to have a family. I have a big family. Life is life, and I don't hold any grudges; not all of them wrote to me or came to see me, but we talked on holidays and things like that. I have 30 nieces and nephews, so I'm making it my goal to be around them. I take them to the zoo, go down to the park with them, just watch them enjoy themselves, and go to their football practices. I'm fortunate that my mother and my dad are still alive. Me and my father, we're building a relationship. We haven't always been close, but even since before I've been incarcerated, we've been building a father-son relationship. We go out every week, eat, and hang out. One of my sisters is in North Carolina, and I haven't seen her yet, but I talk to her on the phone and FaceTime her. It's just amazing to be able to see all these kids, see my brothers and sisters, and just enjoy myself. It means a lot to me. Family is a big part of your life. It can bring you all the enjoyment in the world. I got a different perspective on life and the way I want mine to be. I've been working hard to try and make sure that I'm around my family, that I can build relationships with my family.

**Matty:** That's lovely to hear that you're able to show up for your nieces and nephews like that, and be in their lives.



And I bet it's so exciting to see your family members grow up too.

**David:** Right. It's amazing how I've been home 90 something days, maybe 100, and just in that little bit of time my nephews know who I am. They want to play with me and spend time with me – when I go see them, I'm playing with them for hours. So they know me. I even have two great nieces, and one is actually born on the same day as me. We got the same birthday. She'll be turning three this year, and when I come around her, she knows me, runs to me, you know. So, yeah, it's just joy. It's the joy, man. It's hard to explain, but it's definitely a super joy.

**Matty:** For sure, that's amazing. Thank you so much for sharing about your family. I have one last question – the theme of this *Connect* is "Goals." And I was wondering, what does the word "goals" mean to you? Both in the context of family, and in this era of your life now that you're home?

**David:** I wrote down a bunch of goals when I learned there was a chance I might get released, and I've been checking them off. I just went and got my learner's permit, and reunited with family members that I haven't talked to in 30, 40 years, since even before I got locked up. I really believe that my story is one of the stories that can touch some of these young minds out here, because when I was coming up, I didn't have anybody to go to and be able to talk to and understand me. But I believe that I'm one of the people that can really understand these young guys and young women out here, because I went through what they're going through now. So one of my goals is just to become like a force when it comes to mentorship, helping out the youth, and helping out my community, you know? So I've been working towards that. Another one of my goals is being able to help out family members. My goal is just to evolve in everything I do, whether it's family, working, or building relationships in the community. I'm an artist, so I have to be able to get better at what I do, with art shows and learning the art world. My goal is just to evolve, just to get better. My blessings are not just for me, they're for the people that are around me too. Anything that I touch, I want to touch it in a positive light. I want to be able to help whether it's a little or a lot.

**Matty:** Is there anything else that you want to add? Any advice for your fellow Free Minds members?

**David:** I'll just say for the brothers and sisters that's incarcerated – just keep the faith. You never know what the man got planned for you. That's all I can say. Sometimes it could take a minute, sometimes it may be fast, but you have to be ready to receive it. That's about it.

**Matty:** Definitely. Well, thank you for that last message and for interviewing with me today, David.

*Remember, real connections can grow in all kinds of places, even when you feel you are alone. You still have the power to foster new relationships – through letters, programs, or even within your facility. Know that your Free Minds Family is here for you so feel free to write to us!*



# MEMBERS CONNECT: GOALS

## Cello's Power Circle Of Knowledge By MF (aka Cello)

What's good, FM family? I come to you with peace, humility, and sincerity as I open up our Power Circle. One of the greatest artists of all time, Pablo Picasso was quoted as saying, "Our goals can only be reached through a vehicle of a plan. There is no other route to success." This issue of the Connect resonates with me in a profound way due to the unfortunate fact that I know there's a statistic which states only 5% of people on this planet actually write down their goals. Come on people! We have to do better than this. A lot of times we will set goals in our mind, whether they be realistic or unrealistic, and forget about them later on. We're our own worst enemy when it comes to growth. The author James Allen said, "People are anxious to improve their circumstances but are unwilling to improve themselves; they therefore remain bound."

Let's take off our self-imposed shackles, FM fam! Let us set goals for ourselves and take the proper measures to check each one off of our list. Let's be in that 5%. Even if you start with a small goal, for example, "I'm going to cleanse my room of negativity today." That's a start. Write down some short-term goals you have in mind that you want to accomplish. Then make a long-term goal list. It's good to separate these lists so you don't confuse or overwhelm yourself. Trust me, as you mark off each completed goal, your morale will strengthen and you will be motivated to continue. Stay peaceful, humble and sincere!

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### Goals By DLK

In 2024, I learned how to utilize Microsoft Project. It has allowed me to effectively manage UNICOR's yearly pricing effort. I leverage the skills I learned years ago with SAP and utilize it in parallel with Microsoft Project. I will be able to use this skill set once released in society. Lately, I have a pattern of kindness and peace. I believe if I remain in this mindset, I can affect others in a positive way and be the light that guides them towards happiness through my example.

My personal values are God, Family, and Country. These three things give me a reason to rise up above my circumstances, to leave prison better than I arrived and they give me self-worth. I once neglected/ ignored them, but now, they're what drive me to BE better in order to DO better.

My specific goal is that I want to make freedom a permanent part of my life once released. I will take steps to improve, through courses while incarcerated and do one meaningful class at a time. This will allow me to be employable and to be a better member of society. I will take a new class each quarter.

In the future I seek to be a better man, a better member of society.

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I want to be free from prison, but I need to serve the sentence that I earned through my impulsivity. I need to work out more, but I want to study more. I never loved those closest to me enough and wish I could make it all up to them all, but I can't hold onto the past anymore. I always desire communication with my friends, but I don't write enough. I want more happiness in my life and less sadness or anger. I need more understanding in my life and less judgmental thoughts. I am strong because I have a Momma who supports me and because of my love for my Lord Jesus Christ. What I love most is the beautiful smile of my daughters. The biggest obstacle to getting my needs met is the stigma of what I perceive to be an unforgivable crime. I can move through and past this obstacle by showing members of society that I am not the crime I committed, I am not the man I once was, I have worked hard towards change, I have worked hard to earn trust. I will show true change by being a productive, tax-paying, law-abiding member of society. I will try to balance my wants and needs by taking it one step at a time and never giving up!

### Goals and Plans ByAB

A lot of people don't know there's a difference between a plan and a goal. A plan is short term and a goal is long term. The plan helps you get to the goal and the KEY WORD: is Consistency. IF you're going to achieve excellence in Big things (your Goal), you have to develop the habit in little matters. Excellence is not an exception, it is a prevailing attitude. REMEMBER: Consistency.

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### Goals By FJ

In the future I seek to be a multi billionaire. I want to own several businesses, but I need to get out of prison. I need to start my life goals. I will never give up and wish I could live a happy life with my wife, kids, family and friends more. I always will do the right things, I won't fail or not do enough. I want more for me, my family, and everybody in my life and less negativity. I need more avenues to make things smooth, to complete my life, and less negativity from people. I am strong because I have God and my loved ones. What I love most is my freedom and loved ones. The biggest obstacle to getting my needs met is getting everything done before I leave. I can move past this obstacle by planning and moving in a positive way. I will try to balance my wants and needs by putting my needs first.

In 2024, I learned how to focus more on better things and better days. This skill has helped me move forward in being a better person for me, my family, and society. I have a pattern of being up early to start my day. This can help my goals by arriving at places on time and keeping me motivated to complete more goals. To be successful! My value is being a great person all around the board. It is related to my goal by keeping this straightforward to move forward through life with my loved ones and careers.

One of my specific goals is praying when I wake up. I want to wake up in good spirits and do good things. I hope I can help a person out. This will make me a better man, husband, son, brother, cousin, and nephew during my journey.



# ESSAY BY FREE MINDS FRIEND

## The Go To Guy By Maji (FM Friend)

Everyday when I'm out on the tier while the rest of the men are locked in their cells, as the working man/tier runner, I work relentlessly to make sure to handle the affairs of those who are sitting behind that door. I don't mind doing almost anything anyone needs while I'm the only one out. Whatever they ask for, I usually handle it with ease and without attitude (as long as it's permitted in the institution). Doing "without attitude" is important because it takes positive energy to take care of problems of close to 100 men living in close quarters. I move this way because it's like a cardinal principle in prison tp (politics) whenever you are in any position to be out while others are locked in, it's a must you treat the men with dignity and respect. No matter how long you might have that position, remember it's only temporary. If there's ever a time you lose your job, the men will never forget how you treated them and will treat you accordingly. I make sure I do what I do because I know how it feels to sit behind that cell door and have someone out who is difficult to deal with. Sometimes you don't know what comes out of treating people right, especially those dealing with everyday moments of being incarcerated.

There was a time when a young dude pulled me up as I was sweeping the tier, he asked me a series of questions. He wanted to know how many years I had in and what my sentence was because to him I always moved around as though I'm about to go home one day. Although I'm currently serving a long-term sentence, I told him that I just be laser focused on doing everything I can to be free and leave all this behind. As I was about to resume my cleaning duties, the young dude shouted out something to me that stuck with me when he said, "Big bro, I ain't gonna lie, you like the go-to guy around here." I replayed him saying that in my head that night as I laid on my back. I've never given it a thought, but an idea came to mind wondering if being the "go-to guy" could translate into my reentry back into society. I thought about how it could work in a work environment.

Being the "go-to" guy can be a huge asset to any business or social group if we break down the characteristics of one. One definition defines it as putting yourself in a position to develop new skills and stronger relationships. Another defines it as a trusted or dependable person who is sorted for specific knowledge or skill in a particular manner. I think to be one though, one must first and foremost have common sense. You got to be the one people depend on in a difficult situation. That dependability can be crucial especially if colleagues or friends know they can count on you to provide accurate support or information when it is required. Also having that aura of trustworthiness, which implies that someone can trust you to do the work that needs to be done and consider that your

judgement is one of value for important decisions. Everything leads up to you becoming part of the first choice for help or advice based on your expertise and/or experience in a certain area.

To me though, it's much more than that. From being incarcerated, this position has a lot to do with the conditions that I'm currently forced to live in. Having 19 years in, I witnessed all the highs and lows that a maximum security prison could offer. Learning how to adapt in any situation has been my strongest suit, especially dealing with those who are difficult to deal with. After all I've been through, I realized that with my reputation and character still intact, my name holds a certain respect to it. In return, instead of being macho or egotistical about it, I challenged myself to be more empathetic towards the men (young or old) who didn't have it all together in prison. I figured that I could step in sometimes, be that voice of reason, if they ever were going through problems that needed to be resolved or crises that needed to be managed. Give them that encouragement they truly deserve for the times the prison life really wears down on them mentally. I'm always down with teaching anyone a multitude of things that come with helping to become more self-sufficient in this situation. Overall, I want to be there for them like I would want someone to be there for me.

My goal is to take that "go-to guy" mentality I learned while incarcerated and somehow made it work once I'm back into society. It might take some time to show that I'm worthy to be trusted but people know if they can believe in you these days by the impression you make and by how you truly carry yourself. Plus, once I'm able to share my story, this will enable people to sit me down and pick my brain on my views of the world. If my views are favorable to the masses, I feel like the doors will open to more opportunities. This will really go well with my goal of becoming an event planner/coordinator. I get a kick out of the system of organizing within a group that brings success towards any project. I really appreciate working with people who are about seeing others succeed and elevate.

A "go-to guy" can be a job for anyone who's willing to step up to the plate. A woman could definitely be a "go-to guy". Not to put her on the spot, but here at Free Minds, I look at our very own "Julia" as a go-to guy. Even though one might consider her being at the top of a hierarchy, her down-to-earth demeanor ensures that if you approach her with a request or concern, she is more than willing to share her expertise and resources to make sure the other person gets right. It's countless others who have been that "go-to guy" when things were needed but to truly be recognized as one, remember the old adage that goes: "Treat others the way that you want to be treated."

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Seed

by ER

I'm a seed  
Scattered in the winds  
Of uncertainty,  
With aspirations of cultivated  
In soils of fertility.

I'm a seed  
Enduring forecasts of mystery.  
Whether precipitation or sun rays,  
Win or loss,  
Take it all with consistency.

I spread my roots.

I reach right  
For the sky.

I break the ground.

I grow right before your eye.

The future.

What a surprise.

## I Used To...

by AHM

I used to live life in the moment.  
But now I cherish every moment I have.  
I always cared for others more than myself.  
But I never compromise my morals and principles.  
I once forgot a promise I made to my mother.  
But now I don't make any promises I can't keep.  
If I could go back in time.  
I would make better life choices.  
I will never forget my past.  
But I can prepare for a better future.  
I won't be a burden to my community.  
But I might be an asset to my peers and the youth.  
I used to hope for better days like this.  
But now I am preparing for them.

## Goals

by JS

Goals, the patches in the holes,  
put in life with no direction of where to go.  
Everybody thinks they know what they want,  
but to get it you have to have more than a hunch.  
You have to see it,  
step by step,  
even when things don't go exactly as planned.  
Goals are a compass to show you what direction you're  
headed in.  
Nothing beats a failure but a try.  
So if you're scared of feeling,  
just try.

Goals,  
the things that lead you to what you've never known,  
as you push and pull with the motion of life,  
like the ocean that rises and falls back with the tide,  
like the sun that rises, and falls back in the horizon,  
as the traces of His glory leaves beauty left in the sky,  
with red, orange, and purple, mingling amongst the  
clouds,  
goals will make our Glory as we shine,  
and remain illuminant even at night,  
like the Moon that flies.  
As time calls me to my time,  
goals are the path that if my feet should find,  
then what I want will be mine.

## Goals

by AB

I have a dollar in my pocket.  
I have a million dollars worth of ideas.  
I have visions of success.  
I have a free mind.  
My number one goal  
is to accomplish all of my goals.

# PAYING IT FORWARD: CRUSHING COLONIALISM

By Rebecca

Washington D.C., considered a hub for nonprofits, is also Indigenous (the earliest known people to have lived in a specific region) land, a fact that many either don't know or choose not to meaningfully consider. Occupying a unique intersection of these realities is Crushing Colonialism, a DC-based nonprofit with the mission to "uplift and tell the stories of Indigenous people through media and traditional storytelling." I had the privilege of speaking with Crushing Colonialism's founder, Jen Deerinwater (who uses they/ them pronouns) to learn more about their organization and the work that they do. Deerinwater is a "bisexual, multiply disabled, two-spirit (1) woman" and "an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma." They grew up in rural areas of their reservation and in Texas, before leaving home for college, and have now been in DC since 2016. That same year, Deerinwater founded Crushing Colonialism, with the initial vision of launching a publication. While sufficient finances to do so were not available at that time, Deerinwater knew, based on the strong following and engagement on the organization's Facebook page, the seeds for meaningful impact were present. After talking with Indigenous storytellers, writers, filmmakers, photographers, and other creatives, Deerinwater chose to move Crushing Colonialism into the work of getting resources to Indigenous people who are actively engaged in or want to do storytelling work.

Why storytelling? In addition to being a traditional value in Indigenous communities, Deerinwater also recognizes the importance of Indigenous people telling their own stories because so often Native stories are being told by non-Native people. An additional problem, Deerinwater says, is that "even in the cases where we get to tell our stories, it's never really for us. It's always for a non-Native audience. It's often without context. We have to try to fit in a "Native in History 101" while also trying to talk about the issue at hand in maybe two to four minutes." By telling their own stories, Indigenous individuals get to say, "Here's what we want, here's what we need, and here's what we're doing to get it." In addition, Deerinwater says, "Being able to speak your truth can be a cathartic and a healing process for some people. I think there's a lot of power in telling our stories for ourselves."

When asked for some examples of Crushing Colonialism's mission in action, Deerinwater first mentions the organization's publication, which ultimately launched in December 2023. Published quarterly, *The Magazine* or *La Revista* (the magazine is available in English and Spanish) examines global issues like "disability justice, women's rights, Afro-indigeneity, the arts, and 2SLGBTQIA+ (2) issues" through an Indigenous lens (Crushing Colonialism). *The Magazine* is available digitally and in print, and up to 400 copies of the print magazine are sent to Indigenous community members who aren't readily able to access the publication online due to a lack of telecommunications infrastructure, financial barriers to owning technology, or incarceration. "[T]hose of us considered American Indian and Alaskan Native are incarcerated at the highest rates per capita in the country," Deerinwater notes. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, Native people are incarcerated at double the national rate and at over four times the rate of state and federal incarcerations of white people. "We want to get this work into our relatives," stresses Deerinwater, "and we want to hear from them as well."

Another example of the organization's mission in action are events,

like the Decolonized Beatz Indigenous World Pride, which took place in DC May 30-June 1, 2025. Planning for this event began in December 2022 and was managed by an international planning council. Indigenous people from all six of the inhabited continents were represented in the event programming, which included panels, poetry, drag, music, a pop-up market, reception, dance party, and public health resources. Crushing Colonialism's commitment to disability and language justice was also integrated into the event through the inclusion of features like ASL (American Sign Language) interpretation and event documents in large print and in multiple languages that made the event accessible and welcoming to everyone in the community. In addition, the 2-day event was recorded by a professional live-streaming team so that individuals who were unable to come to DC could still take part in the event.

While Crushing Colonialism has accomplished a lot so far, achieving the organization's goals has not been easy. Like anyone who has worked toward a goal, Jen Deerinwater and their organizational team have encountered setbacks. Deerinwater doesn't hesitate to say that it's been hard, including on their health and wellbeing, because this kind of work is a real labor of love and sacrifice. When the organization doesn't get awarded a grant that they need and deserve, that can be devastating and cause anger and hurt. "But I think sometimes that anger and hurt keeps me going," shares Deerinwater. "I don't know if it's me being a little petty or spiteful, but I'm like, 'Oh, you think you're going to do me this way? All right, I'm going to dig my heels in and I'm going to keep going.'"

*If you're interested in receiving Crushing Colonialism's publication "The Magazine," please let us know and we'll be happy to pass along your request.*

(1)Two-Spirit is a term used to describe an Indigenous person who embodies both masculine and feminine qualities. Two-Spirit individuals are often seen as having unique roles within their communities, which can include spiritual leadership, healing, and caregiving. They may also take on different gender roles and responsibilities depending on the specific Indigenous culture and community they are part of. This term should not be used as an identity by non-Indigenous people. Appropriate alternatives for a non-Indigenous person who identifies as multiple genders are bigender, pangender, and polygender.

(2)An expansion of the commonly used LGBT acronym to stand for Two-Spirit (2S), Lesbian (L), Gay (G), Bisexual (B), Transgender (T), Queer or Questioning (Q), Intersex (I), Asexual (A), used to indicate the vast spectrum of sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions a person may hold over their lifetime (+). Two-Spirit is placed at the beginning of the 2SLGBTQIA+ acronym to acknowledge that Indigenous people and Indigenous identities came before any concept of the Western-defined identities in the rest of the acronym.



# TECH TALK: APPS TO HELP YOU ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS!

By Emily

Hi everyone! Welcome back to the Tech Column. In this edition of the *Connect* we are talking about *goals*. Whether you are setting a short- or long-term goal, there are apps you can load onto the phone you get when you are home that can help!

## Notes

The notes app comes already installed on your phone and is a total lifesaver. I frequently find myself going about my day and suddenly thinking of something I want to remember to do later. If I am at home, I typically scribble it on a sticky note, which often promptly gets lost within the abyss of my desk LOL. When I am out, however, or don't have access to a pen and paper, I use the notes app on my phone. It is essentially a virtual notepad where you can jot down whatever you're thinking about. You can also title the note so that it is easier to find later. I know writers who use the notes app on their phone to write down bits of inspiration. You can also take pictures and keep them in the note. My boyfriend and I have a joint note (that is shared on both of our phones) where we make our grocery list for the week. I also use my notes app as a to-do list: it has a feature where you can make a list and then check off items as you accomplish them. In my opinion, the notes app is the most versatile app on your phone – if you feel overwhelmed by all of the options, Notes is probably the best place to start.

## Reminders

Both iPhones and Samsung Android phones will come preprogrammed with an app called "Reminders." This app is great if you have something that you need to remember, particularly if you need to do it at a certain time. For example, I made a reminder to pay rent. All I had to do was type "pay rent" into the reminders app, and then set it to remind me at 9am on the 27th of every month. Now, when the 27th rolls around, I get a message on my phone to pay my rent!

## Calendar

In my opinion, the calendar app (which comes on your phone when you buy it) is one of the most useful features on your phone. It is completely customizable, and essentially allows you to have a datebook in your pocket. You can input meetings, job interviews, appointments, or whatever you want into your calendar. When you put in these items you can include addresses, special notes, or documents you might need. It is a really convenient place to store all the information you might need! For a more in-depth look at how to

use your calendar app, please see The Future edition of the *Connect* (Volume 14, Issue 1).

## Specific goals:

There are many phone apps and websites that are specifically designed to help you track your goals! For example, I set a goal to read 50 books this year. I am using an app called **Storygraph** to track my progress. The app has a very detailed tracker where, if I wanted to, I could update each day how many pages I read. However, I typically just enter the book after I finish it. What is great about any of these apps is that you can make them work for you! There will be features that you love and other features that you can completely ignore. You know what works for you to help you accomplish your goals.

## Fitness goals:

One other category I know a lot of people use technology for is fitness goals. There are so many fitness trackers out there, but I will mention the main three that I see people using most frequently. The first is just the **fitness tracker** app that comes already installed on your phone. It will track the number of steps you take each day, the number of stairs you climb, and the number of miles you walk or run (assuming you have your phone on you!). This is the most basic level of fitness trackers, and isn't always one hundred percent accurate.

Many of my friends who are runners use some sort of **smart watch**. These are like a normal watch, but with a smartphone screen. Because it is on your wrist instead of in your pocket like your phone, it can get more accurate information. You can also use it to track your heart rate. These trackers can vary in price and there are affordable options that collect less data.

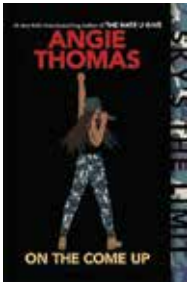

There are also **fitness rings**. You wear them like a regular ring (the band is often slightly thicker) and they can give you very detailed information about your body. Many of the people I know who use these primarily use them to track their sleep. The ring will tell you how long you were asleep, how many times you woke up, how long you were in REM (an important stage of your sleep cycle), etc. It can also track biometrics like your body temperature and your stress levels. These tend to be on the more expensive side – the most popular ring is around \$300.

As always, if you have any additional questions or have a tech topic you would like to know more about please write to us and let us know.

# BAM BOOK BALLOT

Alright Free Minds readers, get your voting pencils 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.

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| 1 |    | <p><b><i>The Many Lives of Mama Love: A Memoir of Lying, Stealing, Writing, and Healing</i></b><br/>by Lara Love Hardin [Memoir]</p> <p>Soccer mom Lara Love Hardin's world turns upside down when the police come knocking on her million-dollar home. Caught stealing her neighbors' credit cards to fund her heroin addiction, Lara is convicted of thirty-two felonies. In jail, she discovers power structures that are completely different to everything she knows. As she begins to climb the social ladder, she acquires the nickname "Mama Love," bringing love and healing to the residents of the jail. When she is released, she reinvents herself as a prominent ghostwriter (a person who is hired to write for an individual, who receives the credit for writing). The shadows of her past follow her as she learns how to forgive herself and others, navigate life on probation, and prove to herself that she is more good than bad.</p> |
| 2 |   | <p><b><i>On the Come Up</i></b><br/>by Angie Thomas [Young Adult]</p> <p>Sixteen-year-old Bri wants to be one of the greatest rappers of all time. As the daughter of an underground hip hop legend who died right before he hit big, Bri's got massive shoes to fill. But it's hard to get your come up when you're labeled a hoodlum at school, and your fridge at home is empty after your mom loses her job. So Bri pours her anger and frustration into her first song, which goes viral for all the wrong reasons. Bri soon finds herself at the center of a controversy, portrayed by the media as more menace than MC. But with an eviction notice staring her family down, Bri is determined to make it. Even if it means becoming the very thing the public has made her out to be.</p>  |
| 3 |  | <p><b><i>Deaf Republic: A Lyric Essay</i></b><br/>by Ilya Kaminsky [Poetry]</p> <p>This collection of poems opens up in a time of political unrest. When soldiers breaking up a protest kill a deaf boy, Petya, the gunshot becomes the last thing the citizens hear – they all have gone deaf, and their dissent becomes coordinated by sign language. The story follows the private lives of townspeople encircled by public violence: a newly married couple, Alfonso and Sonya, expecting a child; the brash Momma Galya, instigating the insurgency from her puppet theater; and Galya's girls, heroically teaching signing by day and by night luring soldiers one by one to their deaths behind the curtain. At once a love story, an elegy, and an urgent plea, Ilya Kaminsky's long-awaited <i>Deaf Republic</i> confronts our time's vicious atrocities and our collective silence in the face of them.</p>  |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 4 |    | <p><b><i>Home Fire</i></b><br/>by Kamila Shamsie [Fiction]</p> <p>After years of watching out for her younger siblings in the wake of their mother's death, Isma has accepted an invitation from a mentor in America that allows her to resume her life-long dream. But she can't stop worrying about Aneeka, her beautiful, headstrong sister back in London, or their brother, Parvaiz, who's disappeared in pursuit of his own dream, to prove himself to the dark legacy of the jihadist father he never knew. When he resurfaces half a globe away, Isma's worst fears are confirmed. Then Eamonn enters the sisters' lives. Son of a powerful political figure, he has his own birthright to live up to—or defy. Suddenly, two families' fates are inextricably, devastatingly entwined, in this searing novel that asks: What sacrifices will we make in the name of love?</p>   |
| 5 |    | <p><b><i>They Called Me a Lioness: A Palestinian Girl's Fight for Freedom</i></b><br/>by Ahed Tamimi and Dena Tarruri [Memoir]</p> <p>Palestinian activist Ahed Tamimi grew up participating in nonviolent demonstrations against the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Her resistance reached a global stage in 2017, when, at sixteen years old, she was filmed slapping an Israeli soldier who refused to leave her front yard. The video went viral, and Tamimi was arrested. But this is not just a story of activism or imprisonment. It is the human-scale story of an occupation that has riveted the world and shaped global politics, from a girl who grew up in the middle of it. Tamimi's father was born in 1967, the year that Israel began its occupation of the West Bank and he grew up immersed in the resistance movement. One of Tamimi's earliest memories is visiting him in prison, poking her toddler fingers through the fence to touch his hand. She herself would spend her seventeenth birthday behind bars. In her memoir, Tamimi sheds light on the humanity not just in occupied Palestine, but also in the unsung lives of people struggling for freedom around the world.</p> |
| 6 |  | <p><b><i>The Only Good Indians</i></b><br/>by Stephen Graham Jones [Horror]</p> <p><i>The Only Good Indians</i> follows the lives of four Native American men and their families, all haunted by a disturbing, deadly event that took place in their youth. Years later, they find themselves tracked by an entity bent on revenge, totally helpless as the culture and traditions they left behind catch up to them in a violent and vengeful way.</p>   |

First Choice \_\_\_\_\_

Second Choice \_\_\_\_\_

Third Choice \_\_\_\_\_

# REENTRY PROFILE

By Darrion

*For this Reentry Profile, we join Free Minds member Jordan as he reflects on his journey from incarceration as a young man to becoming a college graduate and community advocate. He embodies this issue's central theme of "Goals," as he shares how art helps him hope, cope, and envision a brighter future. His story is a reminder that creativity, art and the support of a good community are transformative and reformative tools used to craft better tomorrows.*

**Darrion:** Tell us a little about who you are and your journey.

**Jordan:** My name is Jordan. I became a Free Minds member after being charged as an adult at 16. I'm from Washington, D.C., and outside of sports, I was always drawn to staying educated. That drive stuck with me, even through the hardest times.

**Darrion:** What have you been up to since coming home?

**Jordan:** A lot! I had a few obstacles in the beginning that could've prevented me from achieving my goals, but despite those setbacks, I finished high school, graduated college, and plan to eventually apply to graduate school. I've also served as the Congressman John Lewis Fellow at Free Minds and have been involved in advocacy work for incarcerated individuals with Free Minds' Thrive Under 25 Coalition. I've built real connections and used my voice to help push things forward.

**Darrion:** How has creative expression helped you through the rough moments?

**Jordan:** Art, in any form, is a way to express yourself. For me, it gave me direction when things felt unclear. Through creative writing, reading, and poetry, I was able to picture goals for myself and map out how to get there – even when I couldn't physically see the path. I might not be a painter, but I see myself as an artist through expressive writing.

**Darrion:** What goals are you working on right now?

**Jordan:** Right now, I'm learning a new trade in IT. Technology is advancing every day, and I want to evolve with it – personally and professionally. I also am striving to become a homeowner – a goal that has been keeping me grounded, and reminding me that discipline and hard work is within reach.

**Darrion:** How does focusing on your goals influence your life now?

**Jordan:** Focusing on my goals keeps me guided, driven and disciplined. Having realistic, attainable goals helps me keep direction in my life, and adjusting my goals if necessary helps me stay organized and dedicated to reaching those goals.

**Darrion:** What role has the Free Minds community played in your reentry?

**Jordan:** Free Minds has been my biggest support system. Since 2018, I've met so many members with similar experiences and goals. They helped me with everything – from college visits to applying for scholarships. That kind of support has made a huge difference.

**Darrion:** What advice would you give to someone preparing to come home?

**Jordan:** Don't rush. Move at your own pace. Just because the world is fast doesn't mean you have to be. Use your resources, and don't be afraid to ask for help. That's not weakness – it's wisdom.

Jordan's story is still being written. With future plans to complete graduate school, continue writing poetry, and plan for homeownership, this Free Minds member is not only surviving reentry, but thriving by living his new life of growth and purpose. He is living proof that creativity can provide direction, discipline, and self-expression and light the way forward.





# CONVERSACIONES DE MENTES LIBRES

Por Carlos

## Metas

Saludos mi gente. Espero que al leer este artículo, se encuentren con todas salud y fuerzas...mental como físicamente. Siempre es un placer poder estar con ustedes de esta manera. Aunque estoy lejos, me siento bien cerca de mi familia que está detrás de esas paredes.

Para los que nos acompañan por primera vez en este artículo, mi nombre es Carlos. Fui deportado a mi País natal después de haber cumplido 25 años de encarcelamiento. Mi alivio vino bajo la ley de IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act) en 2020 y después de 5 años, aquí estoy con ustedes desde Honduras.

El tema de esta edición es "Metas." Una cosa que no tenía durante mi tiempo de encarcelamiento. ¡Me explico! Claro que si he hecho ciertas metas. Pero pude entender esa palabra mejor cuando recibí mi libertad. Cuando estaba en prisión, mis metas no eran grandes. Eran metas que me ponía a mi mismo para sobrevivir ese lugar. Metas cómo ahorrar cierta cantidad de dinero para poder comprar otras cosas. O simplemente me metí en ciertos programas de educación y completarlos. Y Conquistaba esas metas, pero no es nada comparado a lo que he experimentado aquí afuera. Al ser mandado a un país nuevo y sin nada, fue empezar de nuevo. Al principio, tenía que alquilar apartamentos amueblados, ya que no tenía cosas como cama, refrigerador o estufa. Estos apartamentos amueblados, son más caros ya que uno paga por el uso de esas cosas que se incluye en la renta mensual. Fue una de las metas más grandes que me puse a mi mismo, ya que requiere ciertos sacrificios de mi parte como no comprar otras cosas. En prisión, estas metas serían fáciles de conquistar, ya que no tenía que pagar renta, luz, agua, internet. Fue allí que me di cuenta que estas metas requieren más de mi parte. No compré ropa ni zapatos caros, aunque quería y necesitaba muchas cosas. Ustedes ya saben que uno quiere todas esas cosas y aún más cuando paso mucho tiempo atrás de esas paredes. Así que trate de no comer afuera lo menos posible, esto también fue difícil para mí ya que salí con ganas de probar toda la comida rica que venden aquí. Repito, metas así para mi fuera fácil, pero siempre había algo que ocupaba la atención de mis ahorros.

Yo entré a prisión a una joven edad. No tenía ni el concepto de lo que es tener metas, menos al ahorrar. Más cuando

esos ahorros vienen con otras prioridades que interrumpen esas metas. Al ser liberado fui expuesto a esta realidad. La prisión me enseñó otras cosas que me ayudaron mucho en obtener mis metas y una de ellas fue "la paciencia." Ustedes ya saben que estar encarcelado es estar expuesto a cosas que uno no tiene control de ello. No se puede hacer nada y al final, cuando uno ya entiende y acepta esto, uno empieza a tener más paciencia. Esto me ayudó mucho porque no les voy mentir, hubo muchas veces que quería gastar ese dinero para otras cosas. Creo que tener una disciplina fue otra cosa que me ayudó mucho. Pero también entendí que al fin de mis gastos, estaba básicamente regalando mi dinero. Así que me puse una meta de ahorros. Suficiente para comprarme ciertas cosas, y poco a poco, fui ejecutando mi meta. Mi meta se trataba de un gasto grande si lo hago solo. Así que mi meta grande, saque metas pequeñas. Empecé comprando una cosa a la vez... primero una cama. Luego una refri pequeña, estufa y lavadora. Mi meta se demoró un año y medio para cumplir. Ya haber cumplido mi meta y comprar estas necesidades, pude encontrar un apartamento a precio más cómodo ya que no tenía que pagar extra por el uso de cosas ajenas. Mi meta fue pequeña, pero venía con sacrificios y muchas cosas nuevas, muchos obstáculos.

Llegar a prisión a una joven edad, nunca tuve las experiencias de la vida. Las cosas que uno no se preocupa cuando es niño porque los padres lo hacían todo. En prisión, uno no tiene estos obstáculos y dificultades así. Tuve que poner estas metas para poder avanzar en mi libertad. Quisiera haber tenido esta educación cuando estuve detrás de esas paredes y poder tener mejores metas y al final, estar mejor preparado para la libertad. En mis momentos de ahorros, me puse a pensar cuánto dinero había malgastado. Hubiera hecho un plan desde entonces y así poder tener más opciones. Y ese es mi consejo para ustedes. Que no se den por vencidos al tener cualquier meta. Todos tenemos metas y llegan momentos cuando darse por vencido es lo más fácil. No hay nadie quien los pueda parar si solo se enfocan en sus metas y no dejar que nadie ni nada los impida a conquistar esas metas. Y tú, cuáles son tus metas? Puedes compartir un consejo para las metas? Tienes o puedes escribir un poema acerca de las metas? Cual ha sido la meta más grande que has cumplido?

# FREE MINDS CONVERSATIONS

By Carlos

## Goals

Greetings my people. I hope that at the moment of reading this article, you find yourself in full health and strength... mentally as well as physically. It is always a pleasure to be able to be with you in this way. Although I am far away, I feel really close to my family who are still behind those walls.

For those who are joining us for the first time in this article, my name is Carlos. I was deported to my native country after having served 25 years of imprisonment. My relief came under the IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act) law in 2020 and after 5 years, here I am with you from Honduras.

The theme of this edition is "Goals," one thing I didn't have during my time of incarceration. Let me explain! Of course I had made certain goals. But I was able to understand that word better once I received my freedom. When I was in prison, my goals were not big. They were goals that I set for myself to survive that place. Goals like saving a certain amount of money to be able to buy other things, or simply participating and completing certain school programs. I conquered those goals, but it's nothing compared to what I've experienced out here. Being sent to a new country and with nothing, it was starting all over. At first, I had to rent furnished apartments, since I didn't have anything like a bed, refrigerator, or stove. These furnished apartments are more expensive since you pay for the use of those things, which is included in the monthly rent. It was one of the biggest goals I set for myself, since it required certain sacrifices on my part like not buying other things. In prison, these goals would be easy to achieve, since I did not have to pay rent, electricity, water, food or internet. It was then that I realized that these goals required more from me. I didn't buy expensive clothes or shoes, although I wanted and needed many things. You already know that you want all those things and even more when you spend a lot of time behind those walls. So I tried to eat out as little as possible. This was also difficult for me since I came home wanting to try all the delicious food they sell here. I repeat, goals like that were easy for me, but there was always something that took from my savings.

I went to prison at a young age. I didn't even have the concept of what it means to have goals, let alone when

saving. Especially when those savings came with other priorities that interrupted those goals. Upon being released, I was exposed to this reality. Prison taught me other things that helped me a lot in achieving my goals and one of them was "patience." You already know that being imprisoned is being exposed to things that you have no control over. Nothing can be done and in the end, when one understands and accepts this, one begins to have more patience. This helped me a lot because I'm not going to lie, there were many times I wanted to spend that money on other things. I think having "discipline" was another thing that helped me a lot. But I also understood that at the end of my monthly spendings, I was basically giving away my money. So I set a savings goal. Enough to buy certain things, and little by little, I was executing my goal. My goal was a big expense if I do it all at once. So for my bigger goal, I made small goals. I started buying one thing at a time... first a bed, then a small refrigerator, stove, and washing machine. My goal took a year and a half to achieve. Having met my goal and purchased these necessities, I was able to find an apartment at a more comfortable price since I did not have to pay extra for the use of other people's things. My goal was small, but it came with sacrifices and many new things, many obstacles.

Going to prison at a young age, I never had the experiences of life. The things you don't worry about when you're a child because your parents did everything. In prison, you don't have these obstacles and difficulties like that. I had to set these goals in order to advance my freedom. I wish I had this education when I was behind those walls so I could have set better goals, and in the end, be better prepared for freedom. I started to think about how much money I had wasted. I should have made a plan since then so I could have more options. And that's my advice to you. Don't give up on having any goal. We all have goals and there come times when giving up is the easiest thing to do. There is no one who can stop you if you only focus on your goals and do not let anyone or anything stop you from achieving those goals. My question to you is, what are your goals? Can you share tips for setting goals? What has been the biggest goal you have accomplished? Write a poem about your goal, we'd love to read it!

**DC PHOTOS** *By Darrion*  
*As requested by our readers*



The African American Civil War Memorial located right outside of U St NW metro station



DC Metro: the Green Line



Street view of the corner of Georgia Ave. and Randolph St. NW

# DC PHOTOS *By Darrion*

*As requested by our readers*



The United States Department of the Treasury



New Cedar Hill Regional Medical Center located in Southeast, DC that opened in April 2025



One of DC's many bike lanes

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!

# REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hey Family, it's good to be back in stride with y'all again. And as usual, I love, love, love this issue's theme! That's not surprising though because I always love our themes, especially since they are always crafted with you guys in mind, and this month's theme is no different. As we know, setting goals is one of the most powerful tools for achieving success and personal growth. It also gives us direction, focus, and a real sense of purpose no matter where we find ourselves in life. Whether we want to improve our health, learn a new skill, or plan for reentry, having clear goals can be the difference between hoping and wishing, to actual implementation.

It's good for us to keep in mind that without goals, we can sometimes look up and find ourselves drifting through life without a clear sense of achievement. That's why goals are so crucial, they can keep us on track and free from feeling anxious and aimless about where we are in life. I like to compare goals to a roadmap, allowing us to map out and prioritize what's important, stay on track while also helping us to stay motivated. They help break down long-term aspirations into manageable steps, making even the biggest dreams feel achievable.

Goals can be short-term or long-term. Short-term goals might include daily habits like exercising or reading, while long-term goals involve major life achievements such as moving to a new city, starting a business, or traveling the world. Both are essential, as short-term goals build momentum and pave the way for long-term success.

About 10 years ago, I learned about a popular formula for setting effective goals. It's referred to as the SMART framework (which you can check out in the Did You Know column on page 42). I've listed out the formula below, however, I've also added my own twist in bold, check them out:

- **Specific:** Clearly define what you want to accomplish (**start by putting pen to paper without procrastinating**)
- **Measurable:** Include criteria to track your progress. (**make them meaningful to you**)
- **Achievable:** Set realistic and attainable goals. (**allow yourself to be ambitious**)
- **Relevant:** Align goals with your values and long-term plans. (**release all self-doubt**)
- **Time-bound:** Set a deadline to stay focused and accountable. (**tell someone else, get an accountability partner who can help keep you on track**)

To be perfectly honest, goal-setting is just the beginning. Commitment, discipline, and flexibility are key to reaching your goals. Regularly reviewing your progress with your accountability partner and adjusting your approach when necessary, can keep you on track and motivated, even when challenges arise. So let's go, go ahead and set them goals, we can't wait to see y'all win!

Now, on to some resources that are so fly, connecting with them when you come home could actually end up on your goals list!

Department of Small and Local Business Development  
441 4th Street, NW, Suite 850 North, Washington, DC 20001  
Phone: (202) 727-3900  
Email: [dsldb@dc.gov](mailto:dsldb@dc.gov)

The Innovation & Equitable Development Office (Inno.ED) at the Department of Small & Local Business Development (DSLBD) provides the Build a Dream training curriculum to DC entrepreneurs and returning citizens.

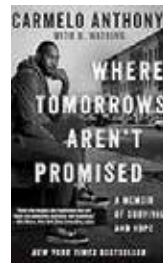
From their website: *The Build a Dream workshop is based on open source information, and this workshop series was developed in the District of Columbia by Kate Mereand in 2017. Many co-trainers have supported, adapted, and continue to use elements of this workshop and the open-source business development principles it is based on. Entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship training, is for everyone to help from start to finish to make your entrepreneurial dreams come true!*

Until we *Connect* again!  
– Ms. Keela

## BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### *with Neely*

I am so excited to introduce our next BAM book to you all: *Where Tomorrow's Aren't Promised: A Memoir of Survival and Hope*. In his memoir, former 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. Thank you to everyone who voted for this selection, we are so eager to hear your thoughts. Here are a few questions to get you started!



1. In the introduction to the book, Carmelo describes Draft Night at Madison Square Garden. He writes that the NBA was never his dream because he didn't allow himself to get lost in a dream that could easily be snatched away. Can you relate? What is a dream you were/are afraid to dream?
2. What image does Carmelo have of his father Curly? Was there anyone that you knew only from other peoples' stories growing up? How do you think your impressions might have been different if you'd experienced them in person?

3. How did Carmelo's mom make up for the family's lack of money? What places did she expose her kids to and share with them? What were some of the most important/impactful places that you saw or visited as a child?
4. Explain how Carmelo felt about his name. How do you feel about your own name?
5. In Chapter 18, Carmelo describes how growing up, everyone came to expect death, and yet he says he never talked about pain, and that everyone was just expected to figure it out on their own. He writes, "*We lived in darkness as a community,*" and that, "*healing wasn't an option.*" Why do you think pain is so often dealt with in isolation this way? What is the result?



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

## **NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: ENTREPRENEURSHIP (VOLUME 14, ISSUE 1)**

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on **Entrepreneurship**. We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Vol. 14, Issue 4 will be exploring the theme of **Compassion & Empathy**.

### **(1)**

If you could start your own business, what would it be? Use this space to brainstorm and dream. What would your business look like? What sort of services would it provide? Would you be the sole employee, or would you collaborate with others?

### **(2)**

Entrepreneurs must be prepared to deal with all sorts of obstacles. Write about a personal experience that taught you an important life lesson, such as a personal challenge you overcame. Dig deep! Consider what you learned in these challenges and analyze what kind of skills they taught you that you can relate to your future work, career, and/or entrepreneurial endeavors.

### (3)

#### LIFE BUSINESS PLAN

**The Problem** (*coming back home from incarceration with a record*) \_\_\_\_\_

**The Solution** (*find job/new friends /new hobbies/self-empowerment*) \_\_\_\_\_

**The Benefits** (*pride/ increased satisfaction/ more peace /better relationships/confidence*) \_\_\_\_\_

**The Elevator Pitch** (*a 30 second statement on you want in your new life plan eg: I want a satisfying career with new friendships and strong family ties living outside of my old neighborhood*) \_\_\_\_\_

### (4)

What are the limiting beliefs you think about yourself that aren't true? How can you move your mindset away from them?

### (5)

#### MY LIFE BUSINESS PLAN

**The problem is** \_\_\_\_\_ (*for example I have a record*)

**I need to** \_\_\_\_\_ (*ex. find a job*)

**But** \_\_\_\_\_ (*what might hold you back*)

**I want to** \_\_\_\_\_ (*hobbies, interests*)

**But** \_\_\_\_\_

**I dream about** \_\_\_\_\_ (*what you want most*)

**I will find a solution I will find a job by** \_\_\_\_\_

**I will make friends who** \_\_\_\_\_

**I will try things like** \_\_\_\_\_

**I will find support from** \_\_\_\_\_

**I will find the solution I will overcome obstacles because** \_\_\_\_\_

**I will feel confident** \_\_\_\_\_

**I will be a better** \_\_\_\_\_

**because** \_\_\_\_\_

**I will feel peace because** \_\_\_\_\_

**I will find the solution** \_\_\_\_\_



# REAL WORLD OF WORK: KENNETH'S GOALS

*Interview by Jennifer*

I caught up with Kenneth by phone at the end of his long day at the DC Central Kitchen Culinary Job training program. His 10 weeks in the classroom kitchen is wrapping up ahead of the program's month-long internship, through which students cook "for real" in a restaurant. Kenneth's hard work toward his reentry career goals has paid off as he was selected to be the first intern at the Waldorf Astoria hotel, which you may remember as the Old Post Office Pavilion – or even the Trump International Hotel (from 2016 – 2022). By the time we finished talking about very hard work and over easy eggs, I was hungry for dinner!

**Q. Kenneth, you came home in December after 19.5 years away. What kinds of goals had you set prior to release?**

I set three major goals while I was preparing to come home.

## GOAL 1: Obtain my Driver's License

It was important to me to come home and immediately start a "legit" lifestyle, so I knew I had to obtain the documents that a functional citizen has. I asked my lawyer to send me a paper copy of the 59-page driver's manual, which I studied before I was released. I ordered my birth certificate and social security card and gathered the necessary documents to establish DC residency. I knew I couldn't apply to any programs or jobs without a valid ID, so I was able to go straight to the DMV and get my ID card as soon as I landed!

Shortly afterwards, I got my learner's permit on my first try! And then I passed my road test on my first try as well. So, within less than a month – and despite winter holiday closures – I achieved my first goal of being a fully licensed driver. Now I love driving and navigating the new Washington, DC and surrounding areas. I thoroughly enjoy the independent feeling of being able to go wherever I want to go!

## GOAL 2: Earn a marketable trade that I could put on a resume

Even though I had plenty of prison work experience and know how to do many things, I wanted to have street experience that I could put on my resume. Since I was 17 when I went in, I didn't have any certificates or experience with employers outside of prison. I applied to a bunch of training programs and DC Central Kitchen called me first, so I started there.

While I successfully cooked a lot in prison, my technical culinary skills were in the basement. I didn't know about the five mother sauces, knife skills, and basic cooking techniques, so my goal was to be a blank sheet of paper that could absorb all of the education. Because I didn't go into the program with the mindset that I knew how to do everything, I was able to learn so much. I earned my ServSafe Managers License for food safety as well as my AllerTrain certification for food and gluten allergies.

However, at one point in the training, some of my classmates and

I felt the instructors were moving too slowly and not intensively enough for us to meet our own culinary goals, so I professionally advocated for staff to push us harder as we needed repetition to master the skills required for prep cook positions. The team appreciated my voicing our request and made adaptations to the training so we students are feeling more confident about our skills as we move into our internships.

**Q. Is there something you're particularly proud of learning how to do in the kitchen?**

YES! I now know how to cook a proper egg!

## GOAL 3: Become financially stable through employment and budgeting

I know that many returning citizens set out to start their own businesses or buy properties as soon as they get home – and I also have similarly spectacular goals! But I had to make my initial goals simple and attainable so that I don't get side-tracked. My goals have evolved as I've spent more time out here. Previously, I never had a desire to be an entrepreneur but after learning the culinary skills now I'm thinking about ways that – after I spend some time working as a full-time cook – I could start a food truck at which customers would walk away not just with my creative food but also with a smile.

**Q. You've had a lot of success in your first 4 months home, but have you experienced any setbacks/challenges?**

Yes, I've had minor setbacks due to having spent time in prison, but I always make sure to remember "my why" that I need to stay on the streets. One example I can share is that when I was sitting in the lobby of a Marriott in Maryland waiting to be called for my Cook interview, I started looking around at the fancy setting and having brief moments of doubt. I wondered if I didn't belong there. However, I quickly thought about that as a "Bully Moment" in which negative thoughts were trying to bully me, but I stood up to those thoughts, overcame them, and had a very successful interview because I KNOW I belong here!

**Q. Do you have any advice for *Connect* readers preparing to come home?**

I recommend you begin to plan for reentry while you're in there. The plans should be simple and practical so they'll be easy to execute. And then consistently prepare for those goals. For example, call somebody to get reading material that will help you get ready. Time out here moves at a rapid pace, so reentry can take you by surprise if you don't prepare.

**Q. Speaking of surprises, has anything surprised you so far in your life out here?**

Well, of course the DC landscape has changed, which was a surprise. But the other thing I hadn't fully expected is that a lot of the help people said was out here IS actually out here!



# JUST LAW: UNDERSTANDING RECORD SEALING AND YRA SET ASIDES

By Tim

An update from one of the cases featured in the previous Just Law column on Current Case Law Update that can be found in both the Community (Vol. 13, Issue 5) and The Future (Vol. 14, Issue 1) Connects: *"I am the IRAA case where I was incarcerated in a different jurisdiction from 1991 to 2014 and went to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) in 2014. When I had my IRAA hearing, I had only served 8 years in the BOP. I never went home so I had over 15 years in (31 years total at the time). This is an issue guys should know about too, because it will affect someone one day! The law is now clearer because of my case. You must have completed 15 years straight no matter where you were incarcerated. My case is a precedent on this issue and I believe those eligible for IRAA need to know this! Thank you."*

## A Path to Second Chances

Historically, Washington, D.C. had one of the worst records relief (expungement) laws in the country. Originally enacted in 2006, DC record sealing laws limited relief to certain misdemeanors and non-conviction records and required long waiting periods. The Second Chance Amendment Act of 2022 (D.C. Law 24-284), recently funded for enactment, marks a significant step towards criminal justice reform. The law became final on March 16, 2023, extended petition-based sealing relief to non-conviction records and all misdemeanors, and certain felonies not involving violence and sexual crimes. The new law also makes sealing automatic for non-convictions and most misdemeanors after a longer waiting period. It facilitates procedures and lessens standards and burdens of proof. Additionally, the new law provides for automatic expungement of marijuana convictions and expungement by petition on grounds of actual innocence.

This law simplifies the record sealing process, expands eligibility, and introduces an automatic record-sealing process. To understand the impact of this legislation, it's essential to explore the differences between record sealing and Youth Rehabilitation Act (YRA) set asides, and how these mechanisms can benefit individuals seeking a fresh start. The Second Chance Amendment Act and the Youth Rehabilitation Act (YRA) both

aim to help young people, but they differ in their scope and approach. The Second Chance Amendment Act focuses on record relief by allowing for automatic or by-motion expungement and sealing of criminal records, expanding eligibility, and simplifying the process. The YRA, on the other hand, provides sentencing alternatives for youth who are tried as adults, offering options like sentencing below mandatory minimums and set asides for their convictions. It is important to note that there are different eligibility requirements for the YRA set aside vs Second Chance record sealing. We recommend consulting your attorney for specific questions regarding eligibility.

## Record Sealing: A Clean Slate

Record sealing is a legal process that restricts access to an individual's criminal record. Once a record is sealed, it is no longer visible to the public, including potential employers, landlords, and educational institutions. This process is particularly beneficial for individuals who have completed their sentences and demonstrated rehabilitation. Under the Second Chance Amendment Act, the record sealing process has been simplified, making it more accessible to a broader range of individuals (although unfortunately, many people are still not eligible for this option).

One of the most significant features of the Second Chance Amendment Act is the introduction of an automatic record-sealing process. This means that eligible records will be sealed without the need for a formal application. The process should take effect by October 2027 and begin automatically sealing eligible misdemeanor offenses. However, offenses must complete a several-year (not more than 10 years) waiting period after the completion of the sentence to qualify for automatic expungement. Until the automated process becomes effective, individuals must petition courts to remove their existing records. The automatic process is designed to reduce barriers and ensure that individuals who qualify for record sealing can benefit from it without navigating a complex legal process. This automatic sealing applies to certain types of offenses and is triggered by

the completion of the individual's sentence and a period of demonstrated good behavior. By removing the need for individuals to apply for record sealing, the law aims to provide a more efficient and equitable path to a clean slate.

### YRA Set Asides Focuses on Rehabilitation

The DC Youth Rehabilitation Act of 1985 (YRA) provides that youth under the age of 22 sentenced for a crime other than homicide are eligible to have their convictions "set aside" [sealed] if they successfully complete their sentence." The Youth Rehabilitation Amendment Act of 2018 raised eligibility from 22 to 24. It adjusted the set aside provision to be applied after the end of a sentence instead of at conviction, thereby expanding the eligibility for young people to apply for the set aside. However, murder, first-degree murder that constitutes an act of terrorism, second-degree murder that constitutes an act of terrorism, first degree sexual abuse, second degree sexual abuse, and first-degree child sexual abuse are ineligible for the set asides.

The YRA set asides are designed specifically for individuals who committed offenses before the age of 25. Under the YRA, eligible individuals can have their convictions "set aside," which means the conviction is dismissed, and the individual is legally restored to the status they held before the conviction. This process emphasizes rehabilitation and acknowledges the potential for growth and change in young offenders. Unlike record sealing, a YRA set aside effectively erases the conviction, allowing individuals to move forward without the burden of a criminal record.

### D.C. Code Section 24-906: Unconditional Discharge Sets Aside Conviction

According to D.C. Code Section 24-906, "upon unconditional discharge of a committed youth offender before the expiration of the sentence imposed, the youth offender's conviction shall be automatically set aside. If the sentence of a committed youth offender expires before unconditional discharge, the United States Parole Commission may, in its discretion, set aside the conviction. Additionally, where a youth offender is sentenced to commitment and a term of supervised release for a felony committed on or after August 5, 2000, and the United States Parole Commission exercises its authority to terminate the term of supervised release before its expiration, the youth offender's conviction shall be automatically set aside."

Furthermore, when a youth has been placed on probation by the court, the court may, in its discretion, unconditionally discharge the youth from probation before the end of the maximum period of probation previously fixed by the court. The discharge shall automatically set aside the conviction. If the sentence of a youth who has been placed on probation by the court expires before unconditional discharge, the court may, in its discretion, set aside the conviction. They may also file a motion to have their conviction set aside after the completion of their probation or sentence of incarceration, supervised release, or parole, whichever is later. The court may, in its discretion, set aside the conviction.

### Practical Applications and Benefits

Both record sealing and YRA set asides offer significant benefits to men and women seeking to rebuild their lives. For example, a person with a sealed record may be able to work as an armed security guard, and other jobs that typically require a clean background check. This opportunity can lead to higher wages and improved job stability. Similarly, individuals with YRA set asides can pursue career opportunities and educational goals without the stigma of a criminal conviction.

In conclusion, the Second Chance Amendment Act provides a valuable framework for individuals seeking to overcome the challenges of a criminal record. By understanding the differences between record sealing and YRA set asides, and the practical benefits they offer, young people can make informed decisions about their path to a brighter future.

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

## 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.

**Daddy and Me**, a children's coloring book by Eddie Robinson

**Description provided by the author:** Join little Sha as she spends time with her dad for the first time. When Sha was just a baby, her father did something wrong and had to go away for a long time. He returns home after 7 years. Sha and her father get to spend time together for the first time ever. Join her and her dad as they do fun things together.

**PLEASE BE ADVISED:** Inside this coloring book there are images and content that shows police and insinuates incarceration. It stipulates how important it is for children to stay in contact with their parent by mail and frequent phone calls while incarcerated. Having this relationship with their parent is important so that when they come home, they are easily accepted into their life.





# THE WRITE WAY: HOW TO WRITE A BOOK

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

*By Matty*

Have a great idea for a book, but not sure where to start? Use this article to help you dream up your future book, jumpstart your creativity, and get to writing. Of course, different kinds of books are going to have different structures (for example, writing a poetry book is very different from writing a novel, and writing a mystery novel is different from a romance novel, etc). These are just meant to be some tips to help you get started.

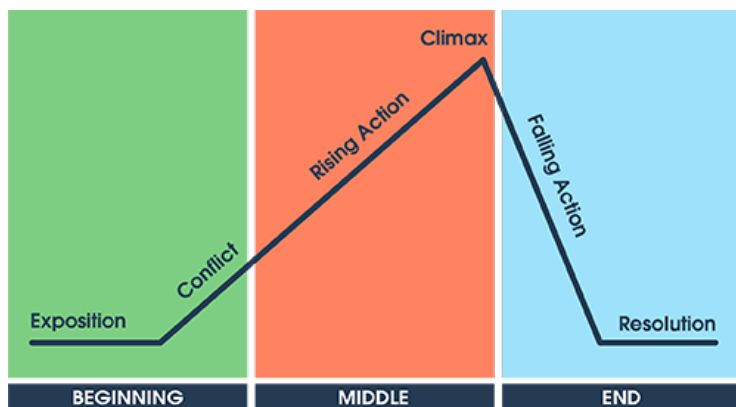
**Start with the genre.** The genre is the category or type of literature characterized by specific conventions, themes, and styles within the book (for example, mystery, thriller, memoir, etc). Will you be writing a fiction or a memoir? A book of essays or an epic science fiction narrative? (See our last issue of the *Connect*, *The Future*, for tips on writing sci-fi!) Nailing down what kind of book you will write first will help with planning out all the other elements. If you're not sure what kind of book you want to write, spend some time reflecting on this question. What kinds of books inspire you? What have you connected with? Are there any genres that have really touched or impacted you? Is there a style of writing that you love to read? Is there a story that you really want to tell? If not, jumpstart your imagination by reading as much as you can. Great writers always start out as avid readers. Use this process of reading and dreaming to pick a broad theme that excites you, and then go from there.

**Map out the main points of your book.** What are the essential plot points or main ideas you want to convey in your book? What thematic elements would you like to touch on? If you're writing fiction, start with developing your main characters and how they will interact with each other. If you're writing a memoir, map out the points of your life that you would like to see represented in the book. Are there common themes running through these points?

## **Develop the plot structure.**

Fiction typically follows the following structure:

First, the **exposition**. Use this to set up your book. This will give an overview of the characters, setting, and some background information of the plot. **Rising action** is defined by tension. Something happens that adds suspense to the plot. Do two characters have a fight? Maybe there's a mystery that needs to be solved? Use this area of your book to build tension until finally, you reach the **climax** of the book. The climax of the plot is the most suspenseful part of



the book, a turning point for the main character. This is followed by **falling action**, where the conflict unravels, and the tension within the book is gradually resolved. Then, finally, the last part of the book is called the **dénouement** (a French word, pronounced “day-noo-maan,” that translates to “unknotting”), or resolution. This part of the book consists of the tying up of loose ends; the plot is wrapped up, tension is resolved, and the book ends. Think about these elements as you map out the plot of your book. You can choose to follow these elements exactly, or not at all! Maybe your book won’t have a perfect ending. It’s up to you to decide what this will look like for your book.

**Jumpstart your creativity.** Writer’s block got you? What are you doing (daily, weekly, monthly) to nurture your creativity? Being an artist is about the act of noticing; creative people have a unique gift to notice and take inspiration from the things and the life around them. Which is why many people may think pain is an essential element of artistry – but pain is simply a situation of heightened noticing, where we are more in touch with the inner workings of ourselves, and may be more drawn to creative expression. Use this perspective to nurture your creativity. What are you noticing? What are you inspired by? The director and screenwriter Julia Cameron swears by “morning pages” as a daily practice of nurturing your creativity. “Morning pages” are three pages of longhand, strictly stream of consciousness writing. Write about how you’re feeling, what you’re thinking about, what you’re noticing, and/or about anything you wish. Do these every day (preferably at the same time). Nurture your creativity in other ways, too: read lots of books! Discuss your ideas with others (such as the Free Minds community)! Adding these simple tasks to your daily creative practice will ease you in being able to complete a longer-form project like a book!

*Stay determined, keep writing, and revise.* Writing a book is not easy. Know that you are not alone in this! Think about what it would take to stay committed to completing your book. Asking others for feedback? Setting a deadline for yourself (such as x number of pages per week, a first draft by the end of the year, etc.)? Know that you will probably need to write multiple drafts of your book. Your book will also likely need editing and a number of revisions so be prepared to make those changes. Remember, your draft doesn’t need to be perfect the first time around! Aim to complete your novel and worry about perfection later. You could hire a copyeditor or even pay someone to give you feedback but you should not expect someone to rewrite your first draft for you. Good luck, and happy writing!

We hope this edition of *The Write Way* was helpful to you and your creativity! The Free Minds community is here to answer your questions and provide feedback for your writing. Free Minds Members can also receive a free copy of the book ***The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting A Writer’s Life in Prison***. This book is edited by Caitis Meissner, former director of PEN America’s Prison and Justice Writing Program. It serves as “a road map for incarcerated people and their allies to have a thriving writing life behind bars—and shared beyond the walls—that draws on the unique insights of more than fifty contributors, most themselves justice-involved, to offer advice, inspiration and resources” (Source: PEN America). Reach out to us at the Free Minds office to request a copy of this book!

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# 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](mailto:connect@freemindsbookclub.org)

Free Minds Getting Out Info:  
Getting Out First Name: Connect  
Getting Out Last Name: Free Minds  
Getting Out Email: [connect@freemindsbookclub.org](mailto:connect@freemindsbookclub.org)

- \*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.



# IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

## DEEP DIVE: THE DEPARTMENT OF GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY

President Donald Trump publicly campaigned for president on promises to deport undocumented immigrants and tackle the inflation that had soured American attitudes about the economy, even at a time where unemployment was at a record low and overall wages had increased.

Trump spent very little time himself talking about shrinking the size of the federal government, or slashing federal grants or full programs. But that aspiration was front and center in Project 2025, a blueprint for the conservative agenda in Washington, and it was a major motivator for one of the president's most important supporters, Elon Musk, whose net worth is estimated to be north of \$400 billion and who provided millions to Trump's campaign.

When Trump was inaugurated, he empowered Musk as a special advisor, and permitted Musk to establish the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE. Trump made the department official with an executive order on his first day in office.

The stated objective of DOGE was to modernize information technology, maximize the productivity of the federal government, and cut excess regulations and spending. These are generally ideas that most of the public would embrace. And to accomplish this, the office deployed its relatively small staff of young, tech-savvy temporary federal employees into executive branch agencies like the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Justice.

In actuality, the work of DOGE has largely produced two outcomes:

- Lowering the number of people working for the federal government. About 260,000 federal workers have either taken a buyout to leave their jobs, or were laid off after DOGE reviews of their agency's operation.
- Cancellation of contracts, leases and grants that the federal government had already agreed to. For example, in April, hundreds of millions of dollars going to justice-related grants were terminated on one day, leaving hundreds of local governments and nonprofits unclear on whether to continue their work on things like violence prevention and youth development.

The DOGE "wall of receipts" says that its efforts have reaped \$180 billion in savings, mostly related to those grant and contract cancellations. However, independent audits from several media outlets and think tanks indicate that the savings might be about half of that.

And even that amount is up for debate due to the fact that dozens of lawsuits have been filed challenging the legality

of DOGE's action. Judges in some of these cases have halted the termination of some federal workers, meaning they remain paid employees of the federal government while not working. In other legal cases, courts have already restored terminated grants, such as the funds for AmeriCorps that DOGE initiated a cancellation of months ago. DOGE's claim of \$180 billion in savings also does not take into account the potential long-term impacts and costs (both human and financial) of these cuts.

Ultimately, it was always going to have to be Congress that fulfilled the main thrust of DOGE, which was to permanently downsize government. Congress is the branch of government that passes laws around how money is spent and how much is appropriated every year, so while DOGE could set the table with quick cuts and layoffs, permanent changes require laws.

But the recent budget and spending bill moving through Congress and endorsed by Donald Trump (see below for more on that) does very little to make any of the cuts and cancellations initiated by DOGE permanent. And currently, that bill is expected to increase, not decrease, federal spending over the next ten years.

Musk recently left the White House expressing public dismay over that bill and its lack of attention to the work of DOGE.

## WORLD



As we publish this news update, a major military escalation has developed in the Middle East. Israel, which is still engaged in an ongoing conflict with Palestine in the Gaza region, has attacked several military and energy installations within Iran's border. The stated purpose: to eradicate its longtime enemy's nuclear program, which Israeli leaders said was imminently going to produce nuclear weapons. Israel itself is widely believed to have a significant stockpile of nuclear weapons, and has not signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. During the strike, the plans for which were years in the making, Israel also killed several

# IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

of Iran's top military generals and scientists.

Iran retaliated immediately, firing hundreds of rockets and ballistic missiles at Israel. As of press time for Free Minds News, many of those artillery pieces were destroyed by Israel's missile defense system, though some broke through and damaged buildings in the city of Tel Aviv.

We will update readers on this in the next edition, as there is much concern that an ongoing conflict between Israel and Iran might spark a broader war that pulls in allies of the two nations. Add this conflict to the continuing war in Ukraine with Russia, one of Iran's major allies, and recent military skirmishes between India and Pakistan, and the world is certainly as unstable as it has been in decades.

On March 28, 2025, a powerful 7.7-7.9 magnitude strike-slip earthquake hit near Mandalay in Myanmar's Sagaing region, the nation's strongest quake since 1912. Official reports cite around 5,456 deaths, 11,404 injuries, and over 538 missing, and overall losses are estimated near \$11 billion. Shelter and access to clean water and food have been impacted for millions in the nation.

## NATION

The Trump administration has ratcheted up its efforts to deport more undocumented people within the borders of the United States, with raids around the country. A recent round of immigration enforcement actions by ICE in Los Angeles sparked days of protests. President Trump, over the objection of California Gov. Gavin Newsom, activated the state national guard and also sent Marines into Los Angeles, which seems to have contributed to even more protests in dozens of cities across the country including Portland, Chicago, New York, Seattle, Houston and Washington, D.C.

The Trump administration has emphasized its right to deploy troops to support ICE and enforce immigration laws, resisting legal challenges—most notably winning a court ruling that keeps federal control over California's National Guard intact.

On Capitol Hill, the House has passed a major spending bill that increases funds for immigration enforcement and completion of a border wall begun under the first Trump term. That bill also locks in tax cuts passed during Trump's first term, which costs the government several trillion dollars, and also eliminates taxes on tips earned by workers in many service industries. The bill pays for some of this with massive cuts to several federal programs, including tens of billions every year from Medicaid and food stamps.

But even with those cuts, so far the Congressional Budget Office is projecting that the package would increase the national debt by trillions of dollars. The national debt currently stands at nearly \$37 trillion, and our debt represents 123% of the national gross domestic product, a key economic indicator that assesses the total value of goods and services produced in the country.

## SPORTS

At the age of 19, tennis phenom Coco Gauff secured her first Grand Slam title with a victory at the U.S. Open. Two years later, she recently clinched her second Grand Slam with a three-set win over Aryna Sabalenka at the French Open. At the men's French Open, Spaniard Carlos Alcaraz bested Jannik Sinner in what will surely go down as one of the great Grand Slam wins of all time. Sinner, who won the first two sets, had three chances to seal a victory, but Alcaraz fought back in a match that lasted nearly six hours.

The season has ended for both the Washington Wizards and Washington Capitals. The Wizards continue a slow rebuild, posting the second worst record in the NBA this year. Later this month, they will select sixth in the draft, hoping to add more young talent to a roster that includes Jordan Poole, Alex Sarr and Bub Carrington.

The Capitals have more quickly revamped their roster and finished this season with the top record in the Eastern Conference before succumbing to the Carolina Hurricanes in the second round of the playoffs. But the Caps season included a major cause for celebration: Alex Ovechkin, in his 20th season, has secured his legacy as the NHL's top goal scorer of all time.

The previous record of 894, held by Wayne Gretzky, was one that many believed would never be broken. But on April 6, Ovechkin got his 895th goal in familiar fashion to fans, with a missile of a wristshot from the top left corner. Gretzky retains the all-time record for points, which is the total number of assists and goals a player records. That might be the most unbreakable record in sports; Gretzky has nearly 1,000 more points than second place Jaromir Jagr.



California Governor Gavin Newsom



Alex Ovechkin mural on 18th St in Adams Morgan

# KEY INGREDIENTS FOR REENTRY SUCCESS

*By Emily*

When Free Minds members first come home and attend our Reentry Orientation, we always ask them to share one short-term goal and one long-term goal they want to achieve now that they are home. For this *Connect*, we asked members – some who have been home just a few months, and others who have been back for years—what they believe has been the key to their success in achieving these goals. Here's what they shared:



"Some valuable information and advice that was passed on to me by my mentor was that if you stay focused on these four areas of life you can't go wrong. They are the four F's: Faith, Family, Fitness, and Finance. He stated that when you leave the house every day if it is not to better yourself in one of these areas you need to turn around and go back in the house and reassess what you're doing. Stay focused on these four F's!" – James

"A key ingredient for me in my pursuit towards freedom has been patience. As human beings we seek instant gratification and have high expectations of ourselves. Have patience... things will fall in place in your pursuit of your goals." – Carlos

"Staying positive through all the ups and downs of reentry." – Charles

"I had friends that had already gone through the reentry process that were able to help shepherd me and who continue to shepherd me through the process. This wealth of knowledge was indispensable to my reentry." – Robert

"Support from reentry organizations like Free Minds!" – Terrell

"One key ingredient for me: Being honest and not deceiving myself or anyone else." – Ryan

"Networking, listening, and using resources. Having an intentionally focused mindset." – Sahir

"The key ingredient for my reentry success was stable housing. When I came home my brother wanted me to stay with him so that I wouldn't have to worry about where I was going to sleep and eat. And it allowed me to move in directions of my choosing and at my own pace. It allowed me to be stress free while I learned how to navigate this new environment." – Jermaine

"My key ingredient for my reentry success is accepting all challenges, and leaving no rock unturned." – Anthony

"Patience was one of the key ingredients for me. My family having patience with me, and me with them." – Irving

"My best ingredient in my release was being able to get into a good transitional facility that really helped me. I was in so long that most of my family had passed away. The transitional facility really helped me to get acclimated back to society." – Eddie

"Consistency. Staying steady and focused." – Kenneth

"My key ingredient for success in my re-entry process was having the support from the Free Minds family. I don't know where I would be had I not had the support from my peers as well as the staff members at Free Minds Book Club. During my incarceration, I lost almost everyone that I loved and those who cared about me. Without Free Minds to help me along the way, I'm very sure that failure would have been constant in my life. So, thank you all for being here for me! I love you guys!" – Kerwin

# MEDITATION: BECOMING... *By Kelli*

I'm calling this meditation "Becoming" (even though it feels like a bit of a rip off from Michelle Obama's beautiful memoir). I love the word becoming. It holds so much promise and hope. We will always misstep along the way, but the bottom line is that every day is a new opportunity for us to move forward and grow into the human that we most want to be. Doing so involves setting goals. They may be big or small, but goals provide us an invaluable measuring stick for our growth.

As some of you may remember, I am from the (great) state of Oregon. Our state tree is the mighty Douglas Fir – it often grows to heights of 250 feet or more. I grew up playing and wandering through Douglas fir forests in the Willamette Valley and the mountains of central Oregon. Just the sweet, clean scent of the trees' needles takes me home and evokes a new sense of possibility.

As we always do with meditation scripts, you can find a partner to read it aloud to you and then switch roles when you're done. Or, you can read it a few times to yourself, before putting the page down and using your recall to meditate on the general theme. Either way, I wish you peace and strength on your journey of becoming! Please write to us and let us know about your experience with this meditation.

Let's begin by settling in.  
If you're sitting, feel the surface beneath you...  
Take a deep breath in through your nose...  
And slowly breathe out through your mouth.

You may want to use a 4-2-6 cadence... Breathe in deeply through your nose for 1...2...3...4...  
Hold it for 1...2...

And exhale slowly for 1...2...3...4...5...6...  
Let your shoulders drop. Let your jaw relax.

One more deep breath in...hold it...  
And let it go.

Now, bring your attention to your heart—the part of you that hopes, that dreams.  
You are already doing the work – every single day – just by showing up, just by being willing to grow.

Now, picture a pinecone... it is adorned with maybe 35 tiny Douglas fir seeds, each no bigger than a grain of rice... A gust of wind causes the pinecone to fall from a high branch to the forest floor... one of those tiny seeds is knocked loose and lays dormant on the dirt. At first, nothing seems to be happening.

But with time, rain, and patience, that seed begins to change.  
At first, nothing is visible – just quiet work in the dark soil.  
But under the surface, it's taking root.

That seed is *you*.

Even when it feels like nothing's changing, something deep inside is growing stronger.

Every single day, the seed is changing, expanding, and growing...

Now picture that seed years later –

It's become a tall, powerful Douglas fir, reaching high into the sky. Its branches spread many feet wide.

It provides for the plants and creatures around it... nesting spots for birds like the Northern Spotted Owl and Cooper's Hawk, and shade from the hot sun for Black-tailed Deer that live in the forest.

The tree is strong and beautiful, and its needles emit a gorgeous fragrance.

Take a slow breath in... and imagine that scent.

That didn't happen overnight.

It grew little by little... season by season... step by step.

Just like that tree, you are growing.

Each choice you make, each effort you give, is a root stretching deeper, a branch reaching higher.

You may not see the full height of your growth yet – but it's happening.

Trust the process.

You are becoming... Walking a quiet path toward your goals.

Some days you move forward a lot. Other days just a little.

But every step matters.

Along the way, you notice signs of progress –

A more peaceful thought... A new practice or discipline... A moment of patience... A better decision. Each one is a small victory. Let yourself feel proud.

Take another breath in... and out.

You're not stuck. You're becoming.

Keep walking your path.

Keep growing – one strong, steady step at a time.

Now gently bring your awareness back to this moment.

Wiggle your fingers... wiggle your toes... and take one last deep breath...

As you explore and set goals for yourself and for who you are becoming, you can always remember the strength and steady growth of the Douglas Fir!

And when you're ready, open your eyes.



# AROUND THE WORLD: A SHORT VACATION IN MARRAKESH, MOROCCO: A SOULFUL ESCAPE TO NORTHERN AFRICA

*By Jamilah*



The Koutoubia Mosque: the iconic largest Mosque in the city

In December, my mother, sister-in-law, and I embarked on a brief but unforgettable five-day vacation to Marrakesh (or Marrakech – both spellings are accepted), Morocco. The trip was inspired by my mother's desire to reconnect with her godson, whom she hadn't seen in six years following the passing of his mother, her best friend. When she casually suggested a visit to Morocco, I eagerly agreed, and we quickly made plans to travel right before the Christmas holidays, from December 17th to 22nd. This was particularly exciting for me as it was my first time visiting Africa, and my mother was thrilled to reunite with her godson, who had been living in Marrakesh for three years.

Our journey began with a 7-hour flight, which included a layover in Casablanca, Morocco, before taking a 50-minute flight to Marrakesh. Upon arrival, my Godbrother greeted us warmly, though not all our luggage made it with us. Thankfully, the airport called later that evening to inform us that our missing bags had been recovered.

We stayed at a hotel in downtown Marrakesh, a convenient location with great free breakfast options, friendly staff, and comfortable accommodations. After a long day of travel, we decided to venture out for a nice dinner. While my mom stayed behind to rest, my brother, sister, and I, along with his Moroccan best friend (who turned out to be an amazing local guide), walked through the area. We dined at a beautiful restaurant with incredible ambiance, where I enjoyed the best red snapper I've ever tasted.



The view from our hotel balcony

Day 2 was a tranquil escape to Mwasi Healing and Restoration Center, a Black-centered wellness retreat and boutique villa in Marrakesh. Created by my brother's business partner from the U.S., Mwasi offered spa services, rooftop dining, a pool, and peace. The resident staff ensured our visit was meaningful and rejuvenating. The space, dedicated to healing and restoring Black lives, was a spiritual highlight, so much so that we planned to return before leaving.

On Day 3, we left the city and ventured into the Atlas Mountains for a full-day tour of Berber villages and stunning waterfalls. It was an enlightening cultural experience. We discovered how the Berber people live in harmony with nature, utilizing local herbs and plants for medicine and cosmetics, including the production of the famous argan oil.

On Day 4, we attended Jumma (Friday prayer) at a nearby mosque, marking my first experience as a member of the Nation of Islam praying in a Sunni mosque. It was a powerful reminder of how deeply Morocco is influenced by its Islamic culture, with the call to prayer echoing through the city five times a day.

After the prayers, we immersed ourselves in the vibrant energy of the Marrakech Souks, a lively market filled with local crafts, spices, and natural remedies. An herbalist guided us through various treatments for issues ranging from insomnia to menopause, and my shopping basket quickly filled up. We also visited the iconic Koutoubia Mosque, the largest mosque in Marrakesh, which is conveniently located within walking distance of the Souks.

On our final day, we enjoyed a relaxing spa day before heading back to the villa for more rest and a fun henna tattoo session. That evening, my godbrother and the villa staff took us to a chic Indian restaurant for dinner, and later, we ventured out to experience Marrakesh's lively nightlife, enjoying live music and mingling at a cozy bar.

Sunday morning saw us enjoying a final breakfast at the hotel before heading to the airport to return home. The entire trip was a beautiful blend of relaxation, cultural exploration, and spiritual connection. The weather in Marrakesh during



The Mosque in walking distance from our hotel, where we participated in Jumma

December was mild, with daytime temperatures around 70°F and cooler nights in the 40s. The Atlas Mountains offered a colder climate, with snow-capped peaks and clear waterfalls.

This trip was more than a vacation. It was a reconnection, a spiritual recharge, and an immersion into a vibrant culture that left a lasting impression. Marrakesh, with all its warmth and wonder, welcomed us like family and touched our hearts in ways we'll never forget.

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## CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- ★ AA and OW graduated from the Workforce Development Institute.
- ★ AWH graduated from dental school.
- ★ BKC completed the In2Work class for Aramark to be hired as an intern.
- ★ BG and DA both got married to their fiancées.
- ★ DB, DEB, DE, and MT passed their learners permit test, and WJ passed his road test.
- ★ DT graduated from Project Empowerment.
- ★ DLK has gone 18 years without a single shot.
- ★ JM secured TWO security jobs.
- ★ NW enrolled in college to receive his Associate Degree in Business Management.

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!

# SPINNING THE TRACK WITH THE ADVICE MAN

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

Dear Advice Man,

I am currently incarcerated for the first time in my life. I had hoped it would be short, but I've just learned I may have to serve a significant amount of time in prison. I'm hoping you can give me advice on "how to jail." I never expected to be in this position. I have children and I want to remain a big and important part of their lives. I want to come through this better, not worse. Is that possible? What would you tell someone like me about how to get through this bid?

Sincerely,  
R.S.

Salutations RS & FM Family,

It's definitely a blessing to be back with you all on this platform to share some wisdom. Since this issue's theme is "Goals," as I share, I want us to pick something out of it and make short- or long-term goals for ourselves.

RS, your honest question is really appreciated as the future is not promised to anyone. On our road to survive captivity, I hope the process we share will assist us to do the time we have to do with our reputations, personhood, and mental facilities intact.

This is how some of us are not letting the time do us. Step one, RS and family, is in life we can't ever give up on ourselves. We have to have faith and keep hope in our dreams. As one of my old wise guys used to say, "A pair of lips will say anything." Don't settle for what you are always told or think, because for more than 22 years, I have watched and seen convictions, sentences, and laws change to our benefit. Right now, there's a big push on programming/rehabilitation. So if I were you, I would come in seeing if my case qualifies for an early release. We just have to survive this, right? No! Like you said, RS, we need to know things of betterment for our children and family. The plan is to change and stay out, so coming in I'd stay in touch with Free Minds, your attorney, jailhouse lawyers, and get a few law reporters' newsletters linked to your email. Know the law and have respect for it. Above all, never should we leave prison worse off than we came in.

Okay, getting on our grown-up thing. We have to be as self-sufficient as we can. We have to come to prison, get educated, get a job, and stop being so selfish. We must learn how to ration our resources. Right now is when we learn we control nothing outside ourselves, due to the fact we are out of the loop. At this point we respectfully try to have our say. Now is the time to get keen about how we

carry ourselves, especially with family.

Second, adjusting to prison is very important to you and your family's emotional and mental states. We do our best not to yoke our family to our daily circumstances. This is the time we establish "healthy relationships" with our support circles and mend and maintain broken and existing relationships. That means with authority figures (prison staff) and our advocates/loved ones on the outside. Better later than never, I learned what healthy relationships and positive communication skills were while in prison. My suggestion to you all if you don't know what this looks like is to take these BOP classes. They will make a difference with family and in business, and will show who you really are. In fact, to the point where I've seen prison staff and even victims of our crimes go and co-sign for our early release. The other big part of this kind of building is taking responsibility for our wrongs through seeking forgiveness. Forgiveness breaks vicious cycles that ripple through our communities.

Third, RS, is understanding that reentry back into our families and society starts the first day you hit the BOP. Get there and get you a positive homie/adult to cell with. Keep and maintain positive communication to minimize any misunderstandings. Here staff watch your every move. These are the people who do your halfway house packet. Don't catch shots (disciplinary infractions) if you can help it, this will cause you to lose good-time\*. Don't leave prison with a worse mentality than you came with. Come in keeping your nose, mind, and record clean. Don't run up bills and put yourself in a position to be treated any kind of way. Be a positive homie and don't get caught up in prison politics, if you find yourself there. Always have the facts before you have something to say or do about a situation. I myself keep my "sucker-duckers" on, and when things get heated, I am in the right because I use my mind and words to de-escalate situations first. In prison, just like the wild, don't isolate yourself or seem weak. Opportunists of all kinds feed off this, and survival is precious. With family in mind, one of the silliest things has always been explaining why you got locked down and your release date set back.

Fourth, as one acclimates to this abnormal environment, never allow yourself to get institutionalized (where you're used to functioning only in an abnormal environment). Lifers shake their heads at guys who do our sentences on the installment plan. RS, believe it or not, the BOP has a ton of classes for you. Most are not certified, but regardless you can put some knowledge in your toolbelt. A great way to stay busy and out of the way and in your own lane is to get a schedule that revolves around programming: WORK - to help take some of



the burden off family; EDUCATION - to enrich your future; PSYCHOLOGY SERVICES - to give you a better understanding of your beliefs and actions; RECREATION - to find a hobby and preserve the vessel we were blessed with. We've made fun of them, but the square life, balanced on all sides, is winning.

The fifth element I will speak on that you brought up is most important. Our time and family are two of our most precious resources. "If somebody had done to me what I did to myself, I would have killed him." That's why daily I try to "kill" the old me. The only way I saw how to do that in prison was to change. Family is the source of our hope and desires to see just what will come. All this energy and work we put in now has to be centered in staying connected to our families, staying free, and cultivating love. When we start to sacrifice, the connection gets stronger. And when we stop trying to control things outside ourselves, our actions are well received and trusted. Now our actions are like emotional bank deposits in the alternative of an emotional withdrawal. We do know these withdrawals come in all kinds of forms. So at this time, we may have to get creative to overcome some barriers. The BOP does have parenting classes that give us skills and ideas to bond with our children and, it is important to note, their care-givers. At some facilities, these classes can even allow us one special visit (no-holds-barred contact with our children), and we get to make the kids a video of us reading them a book. So brush up on your animated reading, mothers and fathers. To call this out and to be mindful on breaking some of our vicious cycles that have been harming us parents over history: going through being sold, kidnapped, killed, broken, and honestly just up and running away from our responsibilities. We have to pay homage and care about how it's been unfair and left on our big mamas and women. Their sacrifice of standing in the gap for us is unsung, because of either our mental or physical death or underachievements. Our children and the women in our communities deserve better for being our backbone. This is a call for us to man-up and learn what it takes to go back and get our positions back, and be leaders and co-pilots to save our family and the love therein. We do this to break some old negative habits. I hope my words and thoughts help us truly see what can be our impact. There's always another big homie's point of view.

For those of you just starting your term of imprisonment, one of the main things that you need to do is to remain in regular communication with your family and friends. If you have children, do your best to strengthen your relationship with your child's mother or father. That way, the family unit remains strong or gets strong. As for how to spend your time in prison; learn, learn, learn! Take advantage of the opportunity to educate yourself. Spend more time in the education department, not in recreation, and definitely not inside of the housing unit. There are always programs that you

can take through Education, Psychology, and Religious Services, if you are religious. Take what's available to you. Every subject/course is worth taking and worthy of your time. Last but not least, mind your own business. Don't be nosy or overly inquisitive. Everything that you need to know, you'll learn. Be perceptive, but not nosy. And always be yourself. Do not pretend to be something that you're not. Life in prison is like living in a microscope, so everything about you is easily seen. Be you! And don't waste the time. Make time work for you.

Regards & Our Best,  
TS and EW

\*Good Conduct Time (GCT) also known as "good time" is a reduction in sentence earned for exemplary behavior and adherence to institutional rules. The maximum amount of good time credit is 54 days per year of the imposed sentence, according to the BOP.

### **Here's additional advice from one of our members in reentry:**

Dear RS,

I want to start by saying that I believe that you are on the right track of becoming a different person already. Wanting to be better is something that can only start from within. I love to hear that you are keeping your children in the forefront of your mind. This is your main goal, to return home to your children and loved ones as a better person.

Sad to hear that you were sentenced with a lot of time. Yet your goal can still be accomplished, just as long as you do not get sidetracked along the way. Losing your vision can be easily done. One wrong choice and it can change everything for you. As for my advice, I will start by saying that you always need to be cautious of the people that you keep around you. Being selective with who you keep close is vital. You have to surround yourself with those that seek the same thing as you. This is not to say that others are bad people, it's just the simple fact that they will be going in a different direction than you. Remember that what others do can also fall on you in prison. It is easy just to get caught up with other's problems just by being close to someone.

After doing 25 years, I learned that when you find a friend that understands your goals, that friend will always want the best for you. They will always encourage you to keep going and to get all the education and programming that you need. He will not put you, your life, freedom nor goals in jeopardy. You will find a lot of these friends along the way, keep them close. Stay the course and always remain strong.

Best wishes,  
Carlos

# 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."

- **Emily:** *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel

I recently read *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel. This dystopian novel follows a cast of interconnected characters before and after a swine flu pandemic wipes out 99% of the world's population. The story moves fluidly across time, offering glimpses of life both before the collapse and in a post-apocalyptic landscape where the few remaining people will do what they can to survive. Mandel eerily captures emotions reminiscent of the early COVID-19 pandemic, despite having written it in 2014 - years before the pandemic occurred. Overall, *Station Eleven* explores the enduring power of human resilience and connection, and, despite its dark setting, offers a poignant reminder of the importance of hope.



- **Sofia:** *The Many Lives of Mama Love: A Memoir of Lying, Stealing, Writing, and Healing* by Lara Love Hardin

Love Hardin details her journey from upper-middle class suburban PTA mom to struggling with a heroin addiction and being charged with multiple felonies related to fraud, theft, and her drug use. She writes about the time she spent in jail and her journey afterwards as she tries to get her life back on track, eventually becoming a successful ghostwriter. Shame and guilt continue to haunt Love Hardin and she openly details the difficulties in navigating her trauma and past no matter how successful she becomes. I'm a little more than halfway finished with the book and I really recommend it! It does a great job at highlighting the unique challenges that women who have been incarcerated faced as well as the complex fragmented criminal legal system that makes it so difficult for anyone who's been incarcerated to actually succeed without facing multiple obstacles along the way. It's also an inspiring tale of hope and redemption.



- **Julia:** *Sunrise on the Reaping* by Suzanne Collins

*Sunrise on the Reaping* by Suzanne Collins is the latest book in the *Hunger Games* series. This is a prequel set 24 years before the first *Hunger Games* book. In this series, a wealthy Capitol rules over 12 districts where people live under violent repression. Part of this repression is an annual event known as the Hunger Games where children from each district are forced to fight each other to the death in a televised spectacle. *Sunrise on the Reaping* focuses on the character of Haymitch, who at 16 years old, is sent to the Hunger Games. I really appreciate the way the author tackles heavy subjects such as oppression, state violence, propaganda, etc. I recommend this series!



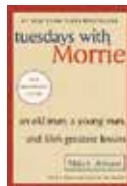
- **Neely:** *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward

I just finished reading *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, which takes the reader on a road trip with a mother and her two children as they make their way to the Mississippi State Penitentiary, commonly known as Parchman, to pick up the children's father. The historical horrors of Mississippi come to light in this book, as a family grapples with the generational effects of racism and state violence. What really captured me is the setting. Ward is from Mississippi, just like myself, and she does a powerful job capturing Mississippi's truth, while honoring the communities that have made the state her and her family's home. A story of loss, grief, and healing, I couldn't put this book down.



- **FG:** *Tuesdays With Morrie* by Mitch Albom

I just finished reading the book *Tuesdays With Morrie*. Man that is one tough book. How that old man is hit with ALS and still looks on the bright side of things. How he simplifies life and all the material things seem to lose its importance. The one thing that rang true was when he said, "If you're trying to show off for people at the top, forget it. They will look down at you anyhow. And if you're trying to show off for the people at the bottom, forget it. They will only envy you." But the thing I like the most is when he says, "When you learn to die, then you learn to live." Man that is some heavy stuff.



- **MH:** *How To Connect* by Thich Nhat Hanh

The book *How To Connect* by Thich Nhat Hanh has opened my mind to a whole new way of thinking, this book couldn't have come at a better time, so I say thank you.



- **CD:** *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi

The book *Children of Blood and Bone* was a good book. I like the way the writer expressed her heart for humanity and continued to fight for peace. Although the author said the book is fiction, she did say what's real in it that occurs in Africa.



# CONVERSATION WITH MELISSA

Hey Everyone!

Wow, it's been a long time since I have chatted with you all through the *Connect*. It was in the Remembrance *Connect* back in 2020. So happy to have this conversation with you all again and to those that are new since then – a big HELLO! My name is Melissa and my role at Free Minds is the Member Experience Manager. In short, I'm the liaison between each programming area (Jail, Prison, and Reentry). I make sure each and every Free Minds member is receiving their correct services from us. If you're going to be released soon, I notify the reentry team. If you're moving between programs, the team and I make sure you are receiving all that we offer in the Prison Book Club or the in-person Jail Book Club.

This year will be my 12th year working with Free Minds. Where has the time gone? I first started with Free Minds as a volunteer, then wore many hats. To name a few – I assisted with office organization, managing volunteers/interns/staff, attended community outreach events, facilitating in-person jail book club sessions, assisted with the grants team, bookkeeping and now programming. I LOVE to learn and expand my knowledge/skills!

I always knew I wanted to work with helping people and work for a nonprofit. My love of nonprofits stemmed from being a part of a college preparation program for underprivileged high school students in DC. I entered this program at the age of 16, and I would say this program was one of the main reasons why I went to college (and successfully completed). Coming from a background of an immigrant family, I did not have many role models for what's next after high school. The caring and motivating staff steered me in a positive direction. Free Minds aims to do that for all of you.

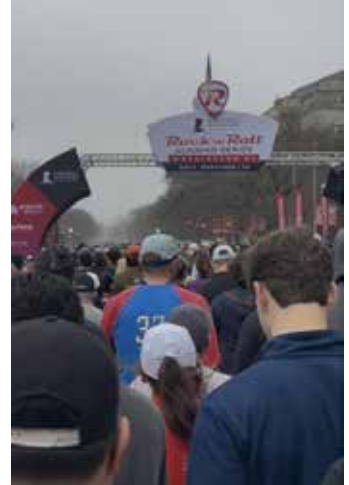
I feel so grateful to work with a wonderful group of compassionate and committed people. Most importantly I feel so grateful to hear amazing stories from what you all are working on, what you're reading, the many accomplishments you've made, and hear about your GOALS.

This issue's theme on "Goals" is SO important and relatable to everyone! Even if you feel like it's a tiny goal, those mini goals are just as important as the big goals. One goal I

wished for myself for 2025 is to be a healthier version of myself. So, I did a crazy thing and signed up for a half marathon (13.1 miles). Free Minds Prison Book Club Manager, Aneka, ran the same half marathon last year, so I felt inspired to do it this year! I'm nowhere near a runner, let alone was into fitness haha (although I wanted to change that).

I only had less than 3 months to train for it, so I really needed to create mini goals to accomplish this big goal on race day! Of course, I had moments that I fell off track, but I picked myself back up and went back on course. Each week, I would increase the length of time running and the speed (if I'm running on a treadmill). All the while, I incorporated active rest days or yoga. I loved those rest days!

A book that helped me keep my goal on track was *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. This book helped me create good habits and get rid of bad habits. With this book and dedication to my mini goals, I successfully finished the half marathon within 3.5 hours (yay!). I'm now gearing up for my next race, which is a 5K (5 kilometers or 3.1 miles) to keep my running momentum going. Can't wait to hear all about your goals and/or goals you've accomplished so far!



The starting line of the Rock N Roll Half Marathon



The medal I received at the end of the race.

# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

*The Free Minds long-distance book club*



## *The Light We Carry: Overcoming in Uncertain Times* by Michelle Obama *with Neely*



Our recent Books Across the Miles selection, *The Light We Carry: Overcoming in Uncertain Times* by Michelle Obama featured 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. Here is what some of you had to say:

**1. In the introduction, Mrs. Obama discusses the process of finding strength and light within yourself: "I believe that each of us carries a bit of inner brightness, something entirely unique and individual, a flame that's worth protecting." What is the "inner brightness" that you carry? If you choose to, how do you share it with others?**

**DLK:** My inner brightness would be my selflessness and compassion. I am a giving tree. I find happiness by sharing. I love to see the light in someone's eyes when you give to them, just right when they were truly in need, whether it was something material or emotional (listening).

**DP:** I feel like I am a special human being. I feel bright no matter what I'm going through. I feel my brightness when I walk around. I carry a LIGHT, can you feel it LOL? I will only share it with my family. I just figured that I don't have friends. Day will bring darkness to your light.

**JD:** I believe the light I carry is that I'm a very compassionate person. So I can easily show empathy. I know at the end of the day everybody wants to be understood. And that's what I share with people.

**DC:** The inner brightness that I carry, I can always remain positive no matter what. I share it with others by uplifting people and telling them it's never too late to change.

**FJ:** By sharing your light with others, by talking and showing them the way of your experience and power.

**2. Mrs. Obama writes a lot about the idea of home, and how it can mean different things for different people. She also explores the idea of making your own home, a place where joy lives and you want to return to. What is home to you?**

**DP:** Home for me is a happy, healthy, and safe place. Where there's memories you will never forget and where the kids feel safe to go to school, do their homework and then play video games. After that, sit around and have conversations about how your day was. That's home to me.

**JD:** I agree with her, because to me home is where my family and loved ones are. Home is not a place. If my family is on the moon, then that's home for me.

**DLK:** It's with family, biological or chosen. It's where I feel safe, loved, and nurtured. It's where judgement ceases to exist and where encouragement is sown and reaped.

**DC:** Home to me is when I'm surrounded by the people that love me and support me. I feel like wherever I go can be my home because I'll make the best out of my situation.

**FJ:** Home is a place of peace, happiness, and excitement. A big house full of family and loved ones.

**3. Throughout the book, Mrs. Obama shares pieces from her toolkit on how to protect and grow one's light. Some of her examples included knitting, filling the seats at your "Kitchen Table" with loved ones, and "going high" in the face of challenges. What advice stood out most to you? Do you have any tips or advice to share from your own toolkit?**

**DP:** I miss kicking it with the family and eating dinner, macaroni and fried chicken, and just talking about our day. Yes, my Free Minds fam taught me education, self-sufficiency, and determination to read. So thank you, that's on my toolkit.

**JD:** The part that stood out to me is surrounding yourself with good people that have your best interest at heart. You know people that's really for you. Especially being in prison, that's a vital tool. Because people will want to use you for all of the wrong reasons, it's a very negative place. So it's hard to find people that really have your best interest at heart.

**FJ:** The filling the table with loved ones stood out to me the most. I like to share my funniest moments. I bring people around to enjoy themselves. People want to be happy and enjoy their time, so they always come around me.

**4. On p.56, Mrs. Obama talks about her childhood fear of a turtle, which she now sees as silly. Did you have any childhood fears that you now think seem silly? How were you able to get over them?**

**DP:** My childhood fears I still did not get over. It's scary but funny being in a large amount of water where you don't have any control in it. Pitch black, that's my fear to this day.

**DC:** I had a childhood fear of clowns. If I had to think back about it, I would say "get over it," and yes, I was able to get over it as I grew up and got older.

**DLK:** Abandonment... being left alone a lot as a young child. Now as odd as it may seem, I got over it

by actually at times cherishing the solitude, the quiet. Sometimes it's when I am the most at peace. I was forced to get rid of fear by having to constantly face this fear as a child, it's not like I had much of a choice then.

**FJ:** My fear was falling down my grandma steps. It was a long flight of steps. I got over it growing up knowing it was a childhood scare.

**5. It can be easy to forget that famous people are humans too, and have similar experiences to us. Were there any stories that Mrs. Obama shared in her book that you found relatable?**

**JD:** The part I related to the most is the relationship that she has with her husband. And how different their personalities are. It reminds me of me and my wife.

**6. Mrs. Obama shares the following quote from Jeanette Winterson: "Language is a finding place, not a hiding place." What does this quote mean to you? If you are a writer, have you experienced this in your work?**

**DP:** Language – it gets you through life and it gives you proper pronunciation shows your communication skills, this is what language means to me. It shows how educated you are. It also brings you skills and people skills and good manners.

**DLK:** Language allowed me through poetry to find that lost inner-child that I had to suppress, and the trauma I was forced to endure. As painful as it was, it was through my poetry (as sad as they are) I started to find healing... as a way to move forward and to make the ultimate decision to not let my formative years define how my future would play out. Choices!



# DID YOU KNOW: ACTION PLANS AND SMART GOALS

*By Jordan*

Many people use action plans to help guide their goals to reality, which can be a lot more effective in comparison to the 'figure it out as you go' approach that most people, including myself, have been used to growing up. An action plan is the blueprint for the process of steps needed to achieve a goal or objective. For example, someone may say that they wish to learn a skill or trade within the next three years. An action plan helps you determine what steps you may need to reach this goal. Strong action plans are generally composed of a clear goal, a measurable time frame to achieve it, as well as a way to monitor your progress toward this goal.

When setting your goal or objective, try utilizing the **SMART** goal method, which is an acronym for **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic and **T**ime Bound. You can also utilize the **RASCI** goal method, which is an acronym for **R**esponsible, **A**ccountable, **S**upportive, **C**onsulted, & **I**nformed. RASCI goals are good for managing projects, but can be good for managing goals as well. RASCI goals are also used for assigning responsibility, which may be useful if your goal or objective requires more than one person to achieve it. The

SMART goal method is more personalized and detailed, and provides a clear roadmap to achieving a goal. An action plan starts with an intriguing idea or thought, but SMART and/or RASCI goal models help aid that idea on its way to being an achievable outcome.

I personally have used the SMART goal method for many of my own life goals, like graduating from college and pursuing a career, but I've most recently used an action plan to help myself learn about IT (information technology). The biggest challenge for me is setting realistic timeframes, and not getting discouraged when I don't meet them, which can happen. Adjusting or updating your action plan as you go is also important, if outside factors affect your measurable time frame. In conclusion, creating an action plan and setting SMART goals or RASCI goals are fairly important for the organization of your life, what you want to accomplish, and how fast (or not) you choose to reach this goal. Creating one and setting attainable benchmarks along the way helps you move forward in small steps, on your way to your objectives or goals.



# DC CULTURE: THE REMOVAL OF THE BLACK LIVES MATTER PLAZA AND THE FREE DC MOVEMENT

By Sofia

DC has long battled with the federal government over its autonomy, but the new presidential administration and Congress have brought new struggles for DC's autonomy. We highlighted this struggle in the "Liberation" *Connect* (Volume 13, Issue 4).

In June 2020, on 16th Street between K and H streets NW, right across from the White House, a 48-foot-wide mural with the words "Black Lives Matter" was painted on the street. Mayor Muriel Bowser ordered the painting and the intersection was named Black Lives Matter Plaza. The order came after protests in the area fighting against police brutality after the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer (Source: WTOP News). The plaza has since been the site for other protests and celebrations in the district, including demonstrations following both former President Biden's election in 2020 and President Trump's reelection in 2024. The mural and plaza renaming held additional significance with DC being a historically Black city, also known as Chocolate City.

The new administration and Congress have made numerous critiques of DC and the Bowser administration. These criticisms have made their way into official legislation with Republican Representative Andrew Clyde (Georgia) introducing House Bill 1774, which would amend a U.S. Code to withhold "certain apportionment funds" (aka funding) from DC unless Mayor Bowser removes the Black Lives Matter phrasing from the plaza. The legislation also demanded the street be redesignated as "Liberty Plaza" and called for DC to remove all the Black Lives Matter Plaza references from city websites and official documents. If the bill passes, DC would have 60 days to remove the phrase from the street and scrub it from all materials. In 2023, the city faced similar legislation from another group of Republicans, though nothing from that proposal ever passed (Source: WTOP News).

Although the bill had yet to move forward, Mayor Bowser announced a day after it was introduced that DC will make changes to the large painting of the words "Black Lives



This street near the White House was painted with the words Black Lives Matter in 2020

Matter" and the mural was completely removed by early April, with the plaza signs gone. Bowser shared that "we have bigger fish to fry" and that "The mural inspired millions of people and helped our city through a painful period, but now we can't afford to be distracted by meaningless congressional interference" and added that "now our focus is on making sure our residents and our economy survives" (Source: NBC4 Washington).

However, DC residents have a history of organizing to prevent the federal government from taking additional control over the District. Free DC is a movement led by the people of DC with the stated goal of ensuring local autonomy and winning "lasting dignity for our communities." The movement began with the Hands Off DC campaign that was profiled in the "Liberation" issue of the *Connect*. The group holds rallies to make the voices of DC residents heard and holds organizing meetings with all of DC and by Ward to plan for how to continue the fight for DC's self-determination.

DC Culture wouldn't be where it is without the hard work of activists that have long fought for increased DC independence. Although the Black Lives Matter Plaza no longer stands, what are some ideas you would have to mark its significance? Or, what would your ideas be for its replacement that might demonstrate an important piece of DC culture? Write to us and let us know your thoughts, we'd love to hear from you!



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

1816 12th Street NW  
Washington, DC 20009

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## **NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

*By Julia*

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An entrepreneur is defined as someone who organizes and manages a business or enterprise (and usually takes on any financial risk of running a business), but for this next issue, we want to think not just about starting a business, but the qualities we can all embrace to start different endeavors or take on different challenges or responsibilities.

We can't all start our own businesses – after all, if everyone did that, who would we have to be part of a team? – but we can all embody the positive characteristics of entrepreneurship. For example, an entrepreneur must be someone who takes initiative. A creative problem solver – someone who identifies a need and comes up with a solution. Someone who is not afraid of failure. After all, starting a business means embracing risk. For the next issue, we want to hear all about your approach to entrepreneurship, whether that's a business you want to start, a creative approach you took to solve a problem, or ways you want to start something new – in your life, your community, or the world!

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



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