

September/October 2025
Vol. 14, Issue 4

Free minds **Connect**



Empathy & Compassion

**"I HURT LIKE THEY HURT"
DELANDO'S STORY**

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THAT NETS MORE THAN INCOME**

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Greetings Empathic Free Minds Members,

I am truly "feeling" this *Connect* issue. 😊 Its timing couldn't be more perfect. With sharp divisions engulfing the US and the world, this collection of stirring and heartwarming examples of kindness and compassion is truly a balm of comfort and relief. Thank you for embodying the spirit of Free Minds and seeking out ways to ease others' pain even when you're in an environment filled with suffering.

It reminds me of the feeling I got when I read about an Iraqi artist in Chicago; he did a piece of performance art where he put himself in a room and allowed people to go both in person and online and, with the click of a button, shoot him with a remotely controlled paintball gun. He wanted to show the impact of technology on modern warfare, where people used the push of a button during the Iraq war to control drones and kill his loved ones from thousands of miles away. He wrote a book about this experience called *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun*. During the course of the month, he was shot over 60,000 times by people from 128 countries. But what stood out to me the most was the many strangers who, touched by his project, brought him homemade muffins, clean socks, or fixtures like a new lamp for his room after an anonymous shooter destroyed the first lamp with a paintball. Or the people online who took over the remote control to prevent others from firing paintballs at him. In the face of dehumanization, there are always those who are filled with empathy, enacting countless kindnesses. These acts, big and small, are what you will find in this issue.

Like Delando in the "Real World of Work" on page 25, sharing his open heart in his job in a transitional shelter for youth. Delando describes why he is so dedicated to the young people he serves: *"I really understand the pain and confusion so many of the kids are experiencing. I can easily remember when I was their age, I didn't have anyone in my life guiding me through challenges and helping me make smart decisions."* Or Greg, an amazing artist, who is also reaching youth with his beautiful, uplifting mural he created for a DC middle school. Every day, kids get to feel his compassionate spirit and energy he brings to all his artwork (page 16).

Carlos, Free Minds' Empath Facilitator, shows us that compassion – taking action – is an important next step after feeling empathy in his story about an encounter with an older man in the pouring rain (pages 14-15). In the "Family Ties" column on page 6, John describes being surrounded by a large, warm family that demonstrated both empathy and compassion with their open door policy in the neighborhood and always doing things for others. He continues that tradition today, prompting us to think, is empathy an ingrained trait or learned? Researchers say both! Some people may be naturally born with a

higher level of empathy, but it can always be gained!

As Regina explores in the "Did You Know?" column on page 42, one powerful way to do this is to read! Especially reading fiction, which has been proven to build empathy as it allows readers to enter characters' minds and practice understanding different perspectives and viewpoints. We see this every day here at Free Minds. Be sure to check out the "What We're Reading" section on page 38 to get some good ideas for new perspectives.

Also make sure you don't miss Reentry Coach Ms. Keela's latest poem (🔥) on page 20. Ms. Keela rocks so much empathy naturally; just being around her makes you want to nurture everything in your path! ❤️

Empathy also comes in deep intense ways as well, with RB sharing his poignant and searing essay on deeply feeling what his actions have caused others and how it's his life work now to repair the harm (page 8). He writes, *"True contrition for me is the point where you realize that you have done something irretrievably wrong that you need to spend the rest of your life correcting and repenting for. Today, I can put myself in my victim's mother's shoes. That day, I saw life through that mother's eyes, and it changed my life. This is why I do the work I do. This is a huge part of who I am today."*

Thank you RB and all our incredible Free Minds contributors. You have truly gifted us with new eyeglasses as RP on page 8 writes, *"Once activated, I began to see through others' eyes using my new eyeglasses made for empathy and compassion."*



I am filled with admiration and hope for humanity.

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: Passion

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

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, Shahid

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 Hosts Annual Cookout at Anacostia Park

Free Minds staff, members, families, and friends gathered at Anacostia Park in mid-September for the annual cookout organized and planned by a committee of members. Attendees enjoyed delicious grilled food prepared by Reentry Coach Tony and reentry members who helped man the grill. Side dishes and other food was catered by a local soul food restaurant. The day was full of fun and in-person reunions. Some activities included flag football and large-sized versions of games like Jenga and Connect Four. Free Minds also brought books and other materials for the whole family to enjoy as many Free Minds members brought their children and loved ones. It was a beautiful sunny day filled with relaxation, laughter and fellowship and we're already counting down the days until next year's cookout celebration!

DC College Students Help the Free Minds Community Meet On the Same Page

With local college students returning to DC for the fall semester, many universities look for local organizations to partner with to introduce their students to community service and the local area. Georgetown University and George Washington University both partnered with Free Minds this past August for service-learning projects meant to introduce their first-year students to the DC area. Students participating in Georgetown University's First Year Orientation to Community Involvement (FOCI) visited the Free Minds office to hear from our Poet Ambassadors about their experiences while incarcerated in addition to poetry written by our members who are currently incarcerated. They then wrote their reflections and comments on your poems. To help us mail these poems, and more that had been shared at various community events throughout the summer, 40 first-year students at George Washington University helped the Free Minds team sort poems, add more comments, and address and stuff envelopes full of colorful poetry. Over 200 poems with words from the community were mailed to our members behind the wall thanks to these dedicated student volunteers.

Job Readiness and Personal Skill Building Apprenticeship for Free Minds Reentry Members

The Free Minds reentry team organized the third Job Readiness and Personal Skill Building Apprenticeship of the year, which 12 members took part in. The apprenticeship offers experiential learning through real-time role plays, with apprentices acquiring essential skills to ace interviews and get those job offers. Apprentices practice interview skills including how to answer the always challenging question of, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" The first day of the apprenticeship took place at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library (the headquarters of the DC public library system) where members took a tour of the library and learned about how to access all of the resources offered there, including computer classes. Members also responded to poetry writing prompts to think more about their goals. On the second and third days of the apprenticeship, members heard from Free Minds friend, Melanie, who shared helpful tips on personal branding, and later heard from Hannah, a financial literacy education specialist, who shared useful budgeting and credit building information. The apprenticeship concluded with members presenting vision boards detailing their dreams and visions for the future.



FREE MINDS MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on recent Connect issues.

PI: Free Minds' Jennifer and Julia came to my facility for a mock job fair and that truly was a breath of fresh air. Being able to interact with different people representing different entities all supplying us with vital information that will help us upon returning to society was invaluable... I didn't get a chance to speak with Julia but me and Jennifer spoke. I felt elated to be able to express to someone in person from Free Minds how appreciative I am for the books and materials y'all have sent me over the years, coupled with how helpful y'all are to those returning home. There's not an organization that can compare to the impact Free Minds have on men who are incarcerated and returning home.

PF: I liked reading the BAM book *Where Tomorrow's Aren't Promised*. Carmelo's story is very inspiring, and he seems to be such a great man... Thank you for all you do for us. I always appreciate receiving mail from you.

JS: Through the miles, fences, and walls that separate us, somehow I feel the effect of your compassion and the sincerity behind your empathy. It's meaningful and has purpose. Thank you.

AHA: Carmelo Anthony's memoir was an excellent book and story that some can relate to. His navigation through it all landed him as a success story so I enjoyed this book... Every piece in our Goals issue showed me how to get the success you want, so no one article stood out. I took something from each article to achieve something I want, like studying for my license prior to coming home to be prepared. So thanks to all who contributed.

FM: I really liked the Goals issue. Goals are very, very, very important! I have a lot of goals that I want to accomplish when I come home. The DC Photos were cool. Especially the pic of the Metro Green Line, it brought back memories. The article about Kenneth's goals was touching. He achieved a lot coming home from prison after doing 19 ½ years. His story was inspiring. Thanks!

QUOTE-I-VATOR

"Compassion is the wish to see others free from suffering."

– Dalai Lama XIV, spiritual leader



Dalai Lama XIV

"Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another." – Alfred Adler, Austrian medical doctor

"If you judge people, you have no time to love them." – Mother Teresa, Catholic nun and Saint

"My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together." – Desmond Tutu, South African bishop and theologian

"The highest form of knowledge... is empathy, for it requires us to suspend our egos and live in another's world." – Bill Bullard, American educator

"Empathy is a quality of character that can change the world." – Barack Obama, 44th US President

"If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each one's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all our hostility." – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, American poet

"Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding." – Albert Einstein, scientist

FAMILY TIES: JOHN'S JOURNEY

By Isaiah

For this issue's Family Ties article, I had the chance to interview our Free Minds member, John. He came home right before Thanksgiving and shared that he ate amazingly. This article follows John and his interactions with his family before, during, and after his incarceration.

Isaiah: How long have you been home and what are you up to now?

John: I appreciate Free Minds for having me and for picking me to be the one to interview. I've been home since November 27, 2024. I came home the day before Thanksgiving, so I had enough time to get that grub in, man. It was wonderful - definitely a wonderful welcome home present to me from family and friends. They put something together. They put food in my stomach that I didn't have in so long. So, I appreciate everybody for that.

Isaiah: Congratulations on being home! So what did you eat for Thanksgiving that day?

John: Oh, man, what did I eat for Thanksgiving? I had turkey, I had greens, I did not have ham because I don't eat pork. I did not have beef. I would love to have it, but I stopped eating it years ago. I stopped eating it in 2015 and I knew it would have crushed me coming home. The food already messed me up because it was fresh in my system, and I did not have real food in years. So, I had turkey, I had chicken, I had yams, I had stuffing, I had the bread roll, and I had pineapples. Oh, man... It was lovely.

Isaiah: That's good. That's good eating right there. Can you tell me more about your family?

John: Growing up, I had a two-parent home. I'm the second of seven. It's five boys, and two girls. So, growing up, my family, we were always tight-knit. We were really family oriented. We were really big on trust, loyalty, honor, and respect. My father and my mother instilled those principles in us since we were kids, and that's just the way we were raised. No matter what, you always look out for your family, your brothers and sisters. You always help the poor and the weak. So that's how I grew up.

Growing up, we didn't have a lot of that other families had. If you wanted to play video games 24/7, you had to beat me. If you beat me, now we have to share the game. With my older brother, he used to always try to trick us into racing for the game because he was fast. He would race us and beat us. That's how I eventually became fast because in order to beat him, I had to go out there and practice. I had to keep running up and down. Racing him, he was like Usain Bolt to us as kids. If you were anywhere close to him, you could blow anybody in the neighborhood out of the water.

Isaiah: Could you go more in-depth about how you interacted with your family before you were incarcerated?

John: We always had cookouts at our house. Our house was the family house. Everybody in our family wanted to use our house to throw a party because my mom already had seven kids. The party already started with seven kids at the house. So, all you had to do

was bring your plate because my mother was going to cook. My mom was going to find a way to provide some type of juice, chips, hot dogs, hamburgers, and chicken. She would always have a way to get something going for the family. My mom always stuck her neck out there for everybody in the family, no matter what it was. She always taught us that no matter what somebody's going through, if you could help them, help them. Now, if somebody is trying to take advantage of you, then you'll recognize it. We had a lot of video games in the house because we had friends coming over, and sometimes they might leave their game there. Eventually, we saved our money to buy our own game system. Our house was the hangout spot for all the kids in the neighborhood.

We had the biggest house. We had like a five-bedroom house. There were only two baths there. Our house was the family house. We had a big ole backyard. Like, if you wanted to throw a party, call my mother. If you want help, call my mother. Anything that the family wanted to do like cookouts, parties or anything, they're going to call and she's going say, "Oh, yeah, come on, come on over." She always had her arms open.

Isaiah: So moving into when you were incarcerated. How did you stay connected with your family? Also, how long were you in?

John: How did I stay connected with my family? Emails! Before emails, it was always phone calls, letters, and visits when I was in DC Jail. My family used to come visit me a lot. They used to always call. I talked with my mother, my brother, and my sisters. I stayed in contact with them through that. When I went to federal prison, the visits were kind of scarce. When I was in Kentucky, I really didn't want my family coming up to visit me. Where I was located in Kentucky, I did not want anyone to risk their life coming to see me. It was a small slope going up the mountain, plus, there were no guardrails. When I was in New York, it was always icy roads, so I did not want my family to come up there to see me. When I was in Atlanta, I stayed there briefly for like six months. My family was planning on taking a trip because two of my brothers and I were all incarcerated in Atlanta. All of us were in Atlanta at one time, so my family was planning a trip to come down to Atlanta to visit us. However, we ended up going to the hole, and they split us up. So I didn't see my family.

I was incarcerated for 16 years. My older brother passed away when I was locked up. While I was in Atlanta, he was going to come out and see us too. However, he ended up passing. We were in the hole when he passed. When my niece came to Atlanta, she was the only family member I saw when I was incarcerated. Earlier, when I was locked up, I was getting into trouble. So, they used to take my visits for a year at a time, two years at a time. People have to plan to visit you. They just can't jump on a plane and see you due to financial situations and work. I don't fault anybody for not being able to come and see me because when they did plan to come see me, the jail was on lockdown. So, it's pushing their schedule back and they took off from work. They could have been working and getting that money. Every single time it was time for a visit, we would be locked down. It was just hit or miss on the family situation coming to see me.

Isaiah: You couldn't get in-person visits like you wanted, so what

did you do to supplement that?

John: I would use the phone to talk to my family. I would see them on video visits and stuff like that.

Isaiah: Did you get physical letters as well?

John: Yes, I got physical letters and cards from my family. I received birthday cards and pictures from my family. They would always send me pictures of my nieces and nephews growing up. I would always send birthday cards, "Thinking of You" cards, pictures of how I'm doing and what I'm looking like these days, and words of encouragement all the time.

Isaiah: How long were you in the DC Jail before you went to federal prison?

John: I was locked up in the DC Jail on November 7, 2008. November 7 is a great day and I'm going to tell you about that later on in the interview. I left the DC jail December 6th, 2010, so roughly about two years.

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

John: I encourage people on the inside to reach out more because it's not a one-way street. In order to receive mail, you have to send mail. Some people on the inside send mail, but don't receive anything back, so they get frustrated. You have to know that people out here have not forgotten about you. They just probably didn't have the time to sit down and write you back yet. They probably want to do something special for you.

When we are locked up sometimes, we think that nobody is worried about me or they don't care about me. Me being incarcerated for 16 years and then coming home, I totally get it now. You would want to do something for somebody, like write them a letter, but there's so much going on today.

You always have to be forever mindful that somebody on the outside of that wall is waiting on you. Whether it's your kids, family, and friends, you always have to have that in the back of your mind.

You have to have that constant reminder that you are loved out here.

Isaiah: What advice do you give to family and friends on the outside?

John: Check on your people! I advise you to check on your people because being locked up, you're in such harsh environments sometimes and people don't know what type of mental state you are in being incarcerated. On your last leg, thinking about crashing out because you feel nobody cares about you or you feel you have to do something that other people are doing. You have to let your family members know on the inside that it's hope out here, people out here are thinking about you, and they love you. You always have to reach out to them and check on their mental state because being incarcerated and going through all these different types of emotions, stages, and transitions doing your bid, can take a toll on you mentally sometimes.

Family and friends write back! Send a letter, send a card, and send a picture. Money doesn't always matter, but people do need money in jail. It doesn't always matter, but you can get a long way with a few dollars.

Isaiah: What have you done with your family since you have been home? Anything new with your family?

John: I'm good with my family! We went out on dinner dates. We went on the road to see my little brother play basketball. He plays college basketball, so we try to go to his games as much as possible wherever he plays. We went on a little family trip out of town. We went on local family trips to the park and swimming pools. We have not been fishing yet, but we definitely will go fishing.

I'm actually about to start my own family right now. I'm expecting my first child on November 7th. Remember earlier in the interview that I said I was going to get back to that date. My son will be born on November 7th, I got locked up on November 7th, and the prosecutors decided not to oppose my IRRAA motion on November 7 as well. So that's three times a charm right there.

Isaiah: Wow, Congratulations. Congratulations on starting a family, that's big right there. Our theme for this *Connect* magazine is Empathy & Compassion. What comes to your mind when you think about empathy and compassion?

John: When I think about empathy and compassion, I think about putting myself in somebody else's shoes and realizing that whatever you're going through in this world, somebody has probably been through it, or somebody is going through it. You can't see life in just one way. You always have to think about the next person because there is always somebody that could be doing worse than you. This is what I think about when I think about empathy. I think about always putting myself in somebody's shoes in trying to figure out what I would do in their situation. When I think about compassion, I think about a lot of stuff. I think about drive. I think about love. I think about family. It's a whole lot when I think about compassion. I think about Free Minds when I think about compassion. On some real stuff, Free Minds was always there for me throughout my whole entire bid. Even when family and friends didn't write, Free Minds was always there for me. Even when I didn't write back, they were always there every step of the way. "John, what are you doing?" "How have you been?" Free Minds was sending me letters, postcards, Flikshop cards, and birthday cards. When I think about Free Minds, I think about compassion and family.

Isaiah: I thank you so much for just taking the time of your day to answer my questions. They were great answers. So thank you so much!

John: I appreciate it. Shout out to my Free Minds Family and the book club. Everybody who made this interview possible. Shout out to my family, all my friends, all my supporters, and my legal team. Shout out to the dudes who're still incarcerated, "Life don't stop, man. Y'all on y'all way soon!" Shout out to my soon-to-be newborn son!

MEMBERS *CONNECT*: EMPATHY & COMPASSION

Empathy/Compassion By RB

At the age of 16, I was arrested and charged as an adult; which all led to me being incarcerated until I was 46 years old. At trial, I can remember having a verbal disagreement with the victim of my crime's mother. I can remember it like it was yesterday. I was sitting in court as she sat and stared at me from the prosecutor's side of the courtroom, when she blurted out "I hope you never come home again...you took my son!" At this time, I had no frame of reference for all the emotions she was dealing with, nor the pain I had caused or the ripple effects of my actions. Honestly, I didn't care. I just didn't have the maturity or the capacity to empathize with her; and I just mouthed "f*** you" back at her.

It wouldn't be until years later that I would be able to empathize with her and to really understand all of the pain, heartache, and lost moments my actions had caused her. It would take a lot of self reflection, growth, and going through the loss of my own loved ones and friends. And it all came together one day for me as I watched the news and saw a mother who had just lost her child to senseless gun violence wail, scream and just go through it as it truly did something to me. It was like she was talking to me or I was seeing that mother in the courtroom again. It hit me like a ton of bricks. I had played a part in putting someone through all of this same pain. I had taken a son. I had taken a potential grandparent from a grandchild. A father from a son. I had set off a chain of events that never could be reversed and this would be how I reached the level of true contrition.

True contrition for me is the point where you realize that you have done something irretrievably wrong that you need to spend the rest of your life correcting and repenting for.

Today, I can put myself in my victim's mother's shoes. That day, I saw life through that mother's eyes, and it changed my life. This is why I do the work I do. This is a huge part of who I am today. I think we all should start putting ourselves in other people's shoes and showing that empathy/compassion.

Empathy and Compassion By RP

The first day I walked into the Department of Corrections (DOC), I was smacked in the face with every wrong I've ever created. On day one, my spirit was fully awakened with a reality of ugly. The disconnect from the conscious place of empathy's compassion was no more. I could now feel the true weight of the heartbreak I'd caused myself and others. The weight of this truth on that day was bottom of the deepest places of the sea, heavy. I could hear the sounds of a submarine as I experienced that type of pressure.

Pressure so vicious I had to use my emergency escape valve in an attempt to release some of the pressures of my life. I put all of my thoughts into alignment with the ever present guilt surrounding me. Selfish desires put me in alignment with the ever present guilt surrounding me. Selfish desires put me in alignment towards life changing failures and ambitious drive. Day one, I placed myself in the shoes of every person I'd done wrong. I felt my first feelings of empathy.

The empathy for those I've treated wrongly pushed me towards writing letters to address wrongs I've done. I wrote letters to my mom, sister, grandmother, aunts, and friends. Each letter I wrote helped me to finally push out the buried guilt. I was truly apologetic to my loved ones. Next, empathy for others I'd wronged began to arrive. I felt sorry for those I sold anything to that was done without compassion. Had I felt compassion for others, many of my hustles would have never happened.

Feeling compassionate for others brought me to realize I

lacked empathetic compassion for myself. Once I understood my lack of compassion for myself, I began to take steps towards letting go of the facade I'd built while living the street life. I had forgotten empathy and compassion for myself and others during my life in the D.C. streets.

Prison has blessed me with the vision of consciously realized self. A vision with the blurred lines of a disconnected consciousness. I felt sorry for myself as I exist daily with a disconnect from my spiritual self. A man lost inside the ideas of what I was supposed to be. Ideas that had nothing to do with purposeful action. Ideas I learned to accept by living in a world around me. Humans are behavior copycats with no sense of copyright laws. We are really what we eat. So I ate at the empathy and compassion table. As I refilled the empty tanks of empathy and compassion, I felt the renewal of my awareness. My consciousness began to activate.

Once activated, I began to see through others' eyes using my new eyeglasses made for empathy and compassion. I began to allow others' wants, needs, desires, and processes to flow knowing that it's okay to not be okay. Knowing people live blind to my experience and I have full aware control of the experience I project. I know it's my responsibility to think empathetically to each experience that involves myself. I fulfill this understanding inside each day by putting others' equal space inside the opportunities of interpersonal live experiencing.

MEMBERS *CONNECT*: EMPATHY & COMPASSION

Disagreement By AC

Once long ago when I was much younger (200 years old here lol), I was working as a technician at a phone store. A lady comes in being rude and in an overall bad mood. She gets a new phone because the old one was totaled. As the new phone was being activated, this seemingly rude lady tells my girl coworker to better make sure everything transfers over from the old phone to the new phone. My coworker came near me to punch my shoulder a few times and tell me in my ear that the rude lady is driving her insane. "Be patient," I told her.

The lady got her new phone and started to go through it. Suddenly she started yelling and being ruder to my coworker. I stayed at a safe distance. But when I saw tears, one in anger and the other in frustration, I risked my life and I approached both of them. The lady was furious that not everything had transferred. My coworker was frustrated because she had done all she could do. They both wanted me to work magic, I wanted myself to work magic as well.

About one hour later, after using two machines, transfers through memory cards, and a few wifi cloud uploads from my old phone, I stated that everything had been imaged and copied to the lady's new phone. She began to examine it and suddenly something inside of her broke and she bursted into tears. I watched her perplexed, but saved all my thoughts and inner judgement. The intensity with which I was watching this lady must not have escaped her, and so she stared back at me. Silently, as if telepathically, she asked me if I wanted to know what had been so important, which now made her cry. I nodded.

She walked up to me and handed me her headphones. I put them on. She hit play on her phone and a woman began a brief monologue. I looked into the lady's eyes while I listened, her eyes filled with tears once again. The recorded

message reached an end with "Bye honey, I love you."

It was such a loving voice, the sentiment was pure. The sweetness and kindness was mixed with a raspy pained voice. There seemed to be a sort of age and urgency in it, which added to its authority and power. But I still could not fully understand its true importance so I looked intently at the lady while she gathered her thoughts and strength.

"That's my mom," she said in a bittersweet tone. "She died last week. I couldn't pick up the phone, and she took it upon herself to leave me this last message." I understood then at once because the voicemail had sounded intimate and not forced or over thought. It felt natural. The only thing I could say was that the mother sounded loving and wise, and that I was sorry for her loss.

The lady cried some more then hugged me tight, I guess more for the fact that she needed a hug more than I needed one, but the hug itself expressed beyond words her pain and also her appreciation. She left quietly through the alternate door, a changed woman in a way.

My coworker noticed her absence and came to me to tell me, ask me in a way, that the crazy rude lady had left, was she gone? The frustration and anger was still too fresh in her mind. I told her to sit with me and I explained everything. When I described the voicemail and its importance, she cried too. It was so interesting to me to see how both of these two strong proud women seemed so changed by this common experience to a point that a demanding customer saw the hard work of, and felt great appreciation for, simple employees; and an employee saw and understood the roots of this woman's pain. It's hard to wear someone else's shoes sometimes. Most times it's not.

Letter to Self By RA

Dear Self,

It is my wish that as you're writing this, you're smiling cheekily at the progress you've made thus far in this stage of life. Even though you've been physically isolated from the free world, you've yet to find yourself broken mentally emotionally, and physically. You've shown complete grace in your gains and praised yourself for putting your pride to the side many of times. You refused to wear your heart on your sleeve and confronted most of your disputes with sound reasonings. Your reluctance to give up your fight for sanity and resilience to muster on proves you've grown so much in life. How you show leadership and still can be a backseat person proves how you're not power struck. How you bring men together to hash out problems shows another side that some can't believe. How you speak about evolving and bringing family together is what's needed. How you speak to your younger family about the ills of street life and stress it's a better way for them. To use your incarceration as motivation to not stray away from what's not working, but persist on in life. When you were granted your IRAA, how you showed empathy towards the victim's family. How you could see the pain in their words towards you and not feel down about it. How you showed empathy from others who you've hurt and felt bad about them and the position they were in. How you show compassion for others who grew up as you, but had no other outlet and choose to do better. I see the urgency in how you're quick to apologize and let your heart speak for you. How you look at the injustices people face and wish their pain away. All in all I see the strides you're continuing to take in life to right your wrongs and the wrong perception of yourself.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Hurt People

by JS

They say, hurt people, hurt people
Growing up, I was always told that we weren't equal
It had me questioning if my worth was equal

My mother was pushed out, disowned
I was pushed out
I guess hurt people hurt people

To me, the goal is to get better

We hit the benchmark, so when I look back
I do it empathetically

There's no manual or guide to life
and I assume when it was time to provide,
her thinking was "it's just me"
No time to explain, just do what I say

If I didn't need an explanation,
it would have worked out perfectly

If I didn't get caught up being rebellious,
I wouldn't only be becoming humble more recently

If I would've listened to you,
we could have gave them a run for their money

Hurt people hurt people,
but hurt people hurt themselves even more

Pain isolates a part of the body or soul,
and it can close opportunity's door

I was trying to prove I didn't need anybody
because the sharp tone of your voice made me feel
like I had nobody

Healing is a process of its own
and it's on yourself more than anything

Hurt people hurt people
and if you can't heal, you'll hurt for eternity

Hurt people can help people
if we can be more than just hurt people.

Empathy

BG

I hate to be in the vicinity where someone is being
bullied

Whether it's a stranger, a friend, or even an enemy
See life has dealt a hand in which it hurts me to say
"I'm all in"

I'm not void of a past
Whether good or bad
So I know how it feels to be happy and glad
Or angry or sad

I try to get you to sense where I stand
Without revealing my hand
I have the power to reach
So I reach to teach

And as I teach
I reach to all I've done wrong
Especially those I've done harm

I hate losing
But as I've lost
I feel lost
To find I've lost none
Except my all

To God, I'm not surprised
You've opened my eyes
I see clearly
I want for no family
To reap the passing of a loved one's demise

I aim to stop the violence
At least with my own hands
Even if it means...
...the loss of me

Eternally I live 4 you all
Giving you my all
In return
So none shall fall.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Mutual Feelings

by JF

When you feel, so do I
When you cry, so do I.

Our minds are different
but our feelings are the same.
We've seen the same images;
Now who's there to blame?

They say when tragedy strikes,
it opens one's eye.
So sad and so young,
The only question is "Why?"

"Time heals all,"
but that simply isn't true.
Hold my hand and pray
because I feel like you.

Thank You

by AC

Thank you old me for being stupid,
But not so stupid to bring an end to myself or another.
Thank you old me for having the smarts to foresee
that better days were to come, that a better man I
could be.

Thank you old me for taking the first steps to proceed
towards a future of knowledge and love,
preparedness, hardwork; patience, rigor and hope.
Thank you old me for teaching me the most important
of lessons:

to be thankful for all that life brings.

The Caring Heart

CD

You entreated for a list of things – now it has
quickenened your heart.

It was warm beneath my feet crossing that lava bed to
reach you

lying there, a broken one-winged angel shedding a
tear.

And when I tried to lift you into my arms,
your wings, all of a sudden, disappeared.

Your weight was but a grain towards my might,
a feather fell in my thought cage as I carried you to
safety.

Then I felt the temperature of your eyes,
so translucent, gazing upon me.

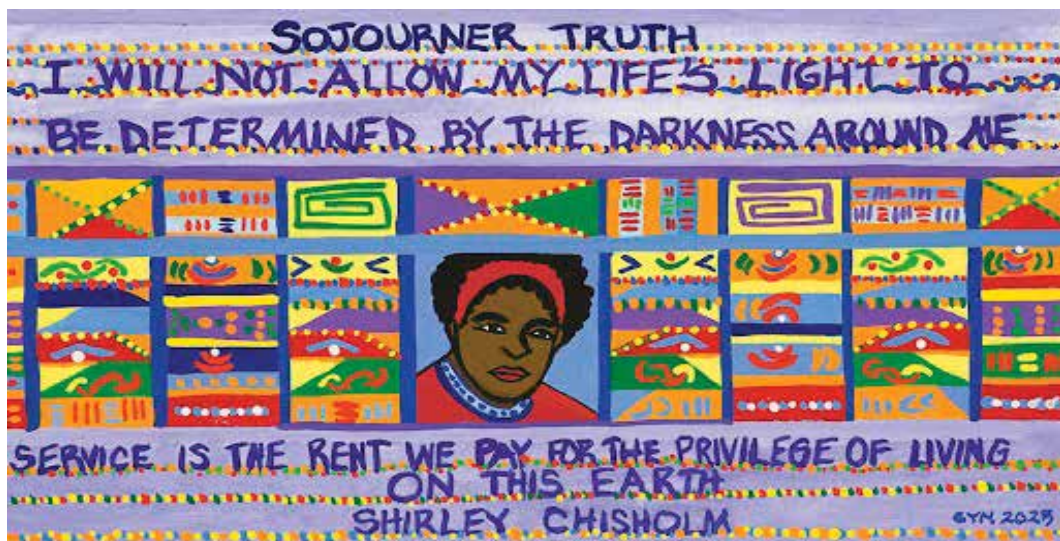
I had yet to notice your hand gliding across my face
until your thumb brushed against my lips.

I stayed there, kneeling before you, entwined,
holding you sitting upright.

Once you stood,
you gave me a tender kiss,
and when I opened my eyes, your wings
were spread wide.

The power and nature of a caring heart.

*Cynthia, a local DMV area artist, created artwork inspired by
Shirley Chisholm, an American politician who, in 1968, became
the first black woman to be elected to the United States Congress.*



TECH TALK: PHISHING AWARENESS

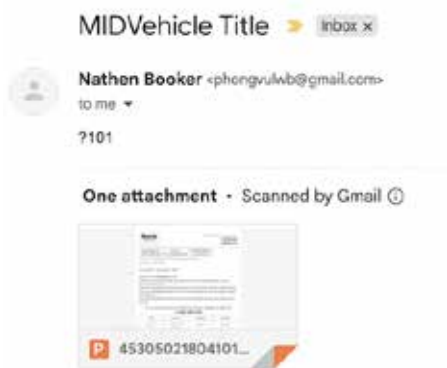
By Emily

Hi everyone, welcome back to the Tech Column! In this edition of the *Connect* we will be talking about **phishing**. **Phishing** is a type of internet scam where someone might send you an email or a text, often pretending to be someone else, in order to get your personal information. While this edition's theme is empathy and compassion, please do not fall for these scams when you get home! Oftentimes the scammer will try to prey on your kindness in order to get the information they are after.

Let's use an email I got this week to look at a few common signs that you might be getting a scam message:

In this example, the actual body of the email is **nonsensical** (having no meaning/ making no sense). It just says "?101". Some scam emails might make more sense than others, but oftentimes there are subtle grammar or sentence structure errors that should prompt your brain to think "Hmm... something doesn't look quite right."

Now, let's look more closely at the attachment that they included with the email. Before we do, I want to caution you that if you think you have received a phishing email, DO NOT download the attachment. Sometimes, these attachments can install malware on your device. Malware, short for malicious software, refers to any intrusive software developed by cybercriminals to disrupt, damage, or gain unauthorized access to computer systems. For this exercise, I just previewed the file. I did not download the attachment.



The first potential sign of a scam is **misspellings**. The subject of the email is "MIDVehicle Title". I can only assume they meant MD Vehicle Title (for Maryland), but already I am suspicious because the subject doesn't make much sense.

Another common sign is a **strange email or phone number**. Often, email or text scams will come from emails or phone numbers that don't look quite right. In this case, it says the name of the sender is "Nathen Booker" but his email address is a totally different name.



This email was made to look like it comes from Geek Squad, which is a real company (it is through Best Buy) that helps fix computer issues. However, another sign I know this is a

scam is that I have never used Geek Squad, and have never made a payment to them. In the email, they designed it to look like I have made a payment to them. If you ever receive something like this, **don't panic**. Scammers want you to react quickly without thinking. They hope that you call the number they provide, and then they can get you on the phone and try to get real information out of you.

In this case, I know I did not purchase anything from Geek Squad and am already aware that it is a scam. If you receive something like this and you are not sure whether you might have actually made the purchase, the best thing to do is to check with **your own bank**. Look up your bank statement, and see if there is a transaction with Geek Squad (or whatever fake company is emailing you). This is a perfectly safe way to confirm that the message you got was indeed a scam. Never use the phone number or link in the message that the scammer sends you.

Phishing can come in all sorts of different ways – Free Minds members have reported getting texts that look like someone is offering them a job, calls that their car insurance is expired and they need to immediately renew it, and emails saying that they have an unpaid bill that is going to collections. Sometimes, it is really clear that the call or email is a scam (i.e. you get a call about your car insurance but you don't have a car). Other times, it is a lot more difficult to tell. If you are ever unsure whether something is legit, **check with a third party**. For example, if you get a text saying you have an unpaid EZ Pass fine (from driving on a toll road), go to the EZ Pass website and check. If someone calls you saying that you have overpaid for a service, check your bank account and see if that is true.

The number one thing to remember when dealing with scams is that the scammer wants you to feel like it is extremely urgent so that you make rash decisions. Be sure to slow down, think rationally, and check with a third party. There are many great things about tech, but there are negatives as well. Keep your wits about you and you should be just fine!

DC PHOTOS *By Neha*
As requested by our readers



The intersection of 14th Street and Duncan Street in the Capitol Hill neighborhood in Northeast.

Continued on page 18

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

CONVERSACIONES DE MENTES LIBRES

Por Carlos

Saludos mi gente. Es mi gran deseo que al leer este artículo se encuentren con la mejor salud. Que se encuentren fuertes en toda manera y mentalmente, estén libres. Para los que no me conocen, me llamo Carlos. Estuve preso por 25 años. Después de recibir alivio en la Corte por medio de la ley de IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act), fui deportado a mi país natal, Honduras. Es un privilegio poder estar con ustedes por este medio.

El tema de esta edición, tenemos el tema de Empatía/Compasión. Comparto que por mucho tiempo, creí que ambas palabras significan lo mismo. En mucho, si tienen relación. Pero me di cuenta que Empatía, es la habilidad de entender y compartir los sentimientos de otra persona. Poniéndose en los zapatos de la otra persona, sintiendo por lo que ellos están pasando, sea felicidad, tristeza, temor o dolor. Por ejemplo, tener un amigo que está en luto por una pérdida y tú sientes su tristeza, casi como si fuera tu propia pérdida.

La compasión va un poco más allá de esto. Tener compasión es ser empático y al mismo tiempo viene con la motivación de querer hacer algo. Un acto! Con el mismo ejemplo de arriba, tener un amigo que esta en luto por una perdida, tienes empatía pero quieres hacer algo más por el/ ella como cocinarle algo o sacarlo a pasear para distraerlo de su dolor. En corto, empatía es sentir por alguien por lo que le está pasando y compasión es tener empatía y querer ayudar, querer hacer algo más.

Para explicar un poco más, les comparto una experiencia con estas dos palabras. Vivía en un apartamento donde el balcon estaba con la mirada a la calle del lado del edificio. Había agarrado la costumbre de tomar mi café en el balcón disfrutando la mañana. Un día note que siempre llegaba un señor de mayor edad. Él llegaba con una carreta llena de cosas todos los días por la noche. Era una persona que no tenía hogar. Me di cuenta solo porque una mañana me levanté más temprano de lo normal. Miré cuando él se levantaba temprano, recolectaba sus cosas, las

metía a su carreta y se iba antes que nadie lo mirara. Me dio mucha lástima verlo así. Me puse a pensar qué sería de mí si no tuviera donde vivir. ¿Dónde dormiría? En ese momento, sentí mucho por lo que estaba pasando.

En Honduras hay temporadas de lluvia. Las lluvias más fuertes caen cuando la etapa cambia de verano a invierno (solo hay dos temporadas). Estaba durmiendo en una de esas noches lluviosas. Los truenos y fuertes lluvias me despertaron. No sé por qué, pero inmediatamente pensé en el señor. Salí al balcón para ver si él estaba... y sí, allí estaba él bajo la lluvia. Había puesto una carpeta de plástico, pero aun así, las lluvias eran muy fuertes y estaba ganando la batalla. En ese momento no solo sentí compasión, sino también el deseo de ayudarlo. Fui a retirar una colcha, un paragua grande y también caliente comida que había dejado en la refri. No sé porque, solo sé que no podía dormir bien sin saber que el señor estaba bien. Baje abajo en la fuerte lluvia. Me acerqué hacia él, le dije que yo era alguien quien vivía en el edificio y solo le quería brindar unas cosas para que él estuviera más cómodo. El señor estaba tan agradecido que empezó a llorar. Al verlo así, se me hizo un nudo en la garganta. Me dijo que nadie lo había tratado así. Me quedé un ratito con él, escuchándolo hablar y contarme cómo perdió todo en un incendio. Me partió el corazón escuchar su historia.

Claro que en ese momento no sabía que estaba haciendo un acto de compasión. Para mí solo estaba ayudando a quien necesitaba ayuda. Sentí su dolor y su pérdida, su necesidad y me puse en sus zapatos. Pero para mí sentirme así no era suficiente y tenía que hacer más. Hoy en día trato de hacer más cosas así. Claro que no puedo ayudar a todos pero cuando pueda hacer actos pequeños así, con todo mi corazón lo hago. Empatía es una cosa, pero tener compasión es algo más grande en mi opinión. Y usted, tiene una historia así? ¿Qué piensan de estas dos palabras? ¿Puedes escribir un poema sobre este tema?

FREE MINDS CONVERSATIONS

By Carlos

Greetings, my people. It is my great wish that upon reading this article, you are in the best of health. May you be strong in every way and mentally free. For those who don't know me, my name is Carlos. I was incarcerated for 25 years. After receiving relief in court through the Incarcerated Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA) law, I was deported to my home country, Honduras. It is a privilege to be with you through this medium.

This issue's theme is Empathy & Compassion. I will share that for a long time, I believed both words meant the same thing. In many ways, they are related. But I learned that empathy is the ability to understand and share another person's feelings. Putting yourself in another person's shoes, feeling what they're going through, be it happiness, sadness, fear, or pain. For example, having a friend who is grieving a loss, and you feel their sadness, almost as if it were your own.

Compassion goes a little further than this. Having compassion is being empathetic, and at the same time, it comes with the motivation to want to do something. An act! Using the same example as above, having a friend who is grieving over a loss, you have empathy but want to do something more for them, like cooking something for them or taking them for a walk to distract them from their pain. In short, empathy is feeling for someone for what they're going through, and compassion is having empathy and wanting to help, wanting to do something more.

To explain a little more, I'll share an experience with you, using these two words. I lived in an apartment with a balcony overlooking the street on the side of the building. I had gotten into the habit of drinking my coffee on the balcony, enjoying the morning. One day, I noticed an older man arriving every night with a cart full of things. He was homeless. I realized this only because one morning I woke up earlier than usual. I watched him get up early, gather his things, put them in his cart, and leave before anyone could

see him. I felt so sorry for him. I started to wonder what would become of me if I had nowhere to live. Where would I sleep? At that moment, I felt deeply for what he was going through.

In Honduras, there are rainy seasons. The heaviest rains fall when the season changes from summer to winter (there are only two seasons). I was sleeping on one of those rainy nights. The thunder and heavy rain woke me up. I don't know why, but I immediately thought of the man. I went out to the balcony to see if he was there... and yes, there he was, under the rain. He had put down a plastic sheet, but even so, the rain was very strong, and he wasn't winning the battle. At that moment, I not only felt compassion, but also the desire to help him. I went to remove a blanket, a large umbrella, and also some hot food I had left in the refrigerator. I don't know why, but I only know that I couldn't sleep well without knowing the man was okay. I went downstairs in the heavy rain. I approached him, told him that I lived in the building and I just wanted to give him some things to make him more comfortable. The man was so grateful that he started to cry. Seeing him like that, a lump formed in my throat. He told me that no one had ever treated him like that. I stayed with him for a while, listening to him talk and tell me how he lost everything in a fire. It broke my heart to hear his story.

Of course, at the time, I didn't know I was doing an act of compassion. For me, I was just helping someone who needed help. I felt their pain and their loss, their need, and I put myself in their shoes. But for me, feeling that way wasn't enough, and I had to do more. Nowadays, I try to do more things like this. Of course, I can't help everyone, but when I can do small acts like this, I do them with all my heart. Empathy is one thing, but having compassion is something bigger, in my opinion. And you? Do you have a story like that? What do you think about these two words? Can you write a poem about this topic?



A mural that Greg created for a school in DC

REENTRY PROFILE: GREG THE ARTIST

By Isaiah

For this reentry profile, I had the chance to interview our Free Minds member, Gregory (Greg). From humble beginnings to having his artwork shown in the Kennedy Center and Studio Gallery, Greg illustrates his desire to preserve and be the greatest student of the arts. He's been home for three years and is positively impacting the lives of both formerly and currently incarcerated individuals through the arts. Before the interview was conducted, Greg had returned to Washington, DC, from Los Angeles, California where he had attended the Black Boy Art Show. He shares with us how he uses empathy and compassion in his art.

Isaiah: Can you tell me about yourself and your journey?

Greg: I'm a Washington, DC native. I was born and raised in DC in the Northeast quadrant. I've come from humble beginnings, where everything wasn't handed to me on a silver platter. The environment I grew up in was super underdeveloped, dangerous, and drug-infested. I had a beautiful mother who came to that vicious habit. A lot of the time, on a spectrum of going through that and having children, when you're dealing with a parent who's a single mother and has that type of addiction, the children are on the lower end of the spectrum because they're rationalizing with, are they going to feed their habit or they're going to feed their children? I've come up in a time when my brother and I were at the losing end of that, which caused me to go into survival mode. As I grew older, I veered into the streets to survive and make a way for myself. Those types of things in those instances, they're not always pleasant. It leads to a kind of debilitating life of crime, so to speak. You'll go up for a second, but you will spiral down really, really quickly, and that led to me being landed in jail, so to speak.

Isaiah: How long have you been home?

Greg: The 29th of July of this year, makes it my third year of being free.

Isaiah: How did you learn about Free Minds?

Greg: I learned about Free Minds while I was incarcerated. It was a lot of guys who were already a part of the book club, and they were receiving the correspondence and books. Then one time I got some

mail from them asking, "Would I like to join the book club?" and of course, I said, "Yeah," because I was always interested in reading, studying, books, and all that stuff. I got on board, and it's been on from there.

Isaiah: I know you just attended an art show in Los Angeles, but before we get into the art show, I want to know, what inspired your love for art?

Greg: I was always an artistic and creative child. I recall from my days in grade school, drawing on, back then, they had this cheap little brown news print paper that they used to fold in quarters and tear down the side. You had to pass it around the classroom so everybody could get a section of the paper and then you had to divide it in three. The teacher would tell you, or give you the option of what you should, what you could, or what she would instruct you to draw. Once I started doing that, I found a love for art. I had a natural ability to draw. I kept up with it throughout high school, doodling here, because I loved to draw, but I didn't have a clue that I could make a lifestyle and earn a living off of it. It was just a hobby, until I really started to try to get serious with it before my time of incarceration. Once I was incarcerated, I had time to hone in the skill, the craft, and learn about the history. It brought me up to where I am now, and I'm still a student of it, and absolutely love it.

Isaiah: Since being free, what organizations or art shows have you participated in?

Greg: I'm a part of Free Minds and their book club. They are a nucleus! I'm talking about a wellspring of love, connection, information, and community. I've never been a part of an organization that's so loving and nurturing as Free Minds. I'm talking about smart, brilliant-minded individuals who have nothing but a lot of love, skills, and nurturing to help you become your best you. I'm a part of this organization called Beauty Behind Bars that I co-curate. We do exhibitions and highlight a lot of the formerly and currently incarcerated people's work to afford them a platform to showcase their work and their art. We want the community to know that a lot of these artists are more than their crimes. I can vividly remember wanting to have a platform to showcase my art while I

was incarcerated; so we are affording those who are behind the walls and those who are out, that platform to showcase their art. I've done work for Studio Gallery, the oldest historic gallery in DC. I've been a part of the Political Leadership Academy in the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution and the Bipartisan Leadership at George Mason University. I've had my work shown in the Kennedy Center, Renwick Gallery, and both the Black Boy Art Shows in DC and Los Angeles. I'm currently working on extending my portfolio because I have larger pieces. I want to create my solo show. I also had exhibitions at Saint Mark's, the old Episcopal historical church on Capitol Hill.

Isaiah: Could you talk more about the Black Boy Art Show in Los Angeles that you just came back from, and your experience?

Greg: Well, this is my second Black Boy Art Show. The brother, Joshua, hosted it. He's a curator of those events. It's a loving community that showcases and highlights Black artists and their art. The experience was amazing! You meet so many people from all walks of life. All shapes and sizes that come over all over the world to participate and to vent at these events. You rub elbows, meet people and connect, show your work, share your experiences, talk about your work, and talk about your processes. This is a loving community. You can let your hair down. You can enjoy the artwork, your food and beverages, and the spoken word. It's a lovely event to be in if you haven't experienced it yourself.

Isaiah: Our theme for this *Connect* Magazine is Empathy and Compassion. What comes to your mind when you think about empathy and compassion? Have you applied it to your daily life, and has empathy and compassion shown up in any of your work that you've done?

Greg: Being empathetic with people who are dealing with a lot of things, especially where I've come from and what I've been through; you can sympathize and you can empathize with people in their struggle, but those are two totally different aspects and verbiage. So empathy, I think that I can relate exactly to what it is that you're actually going through, because I've been in a position like that myself, not feeling sorry for you, but feeling what you are feeling. Whether it's feeling what you're going through, feeling your pain, your joy, your highs, and your lows, I can empathize with a person. I've shared that these things project themselves in a lot of my pieces in my work and I practice these things in my daily life.

Having compassion for people who have done me wrong and really understanding what it means, more so as I'm applying these things in my life, what it means to really receive compassion and receive grace and receive empathy from other people that I have wronged. Even people who are welcoming us back and championing us back into society, although we have committed wrongs at some point in our lives. So, I offer a lot of people that I come across grace, love, compassion, and empathy because I've been in that position where I needed a person to empathize with me and to show me some compassion. I'm the number one person who really knows the weight of being forgiven and receiving grace and compassion. I have no other alternative but to utilize and keep learning that lesson and pressing that forward to other people that I meet. As a result, that is how you stay humble, and that's how you grow. It's a beautiful thing to practice in your self-development.

Isaiah: Thank you so much for this answer, and my last two questions will be for our Free Minds members. What organizations or art shows can our members participate in to showcase their art, whether they're currently incarcerated or released?

Greg: I definitely recommend Beauty Behind Bars. That is our little community and organization. That's what we champion, and one of the hallmarks of our organization is to afford incarcerated and formerly incarcerated artists a platform to showcase their work. We have prints, receive donations, and try to do some things that are financially and socially beneficial. Additionally, just have some sense of belonging because we all fall short, we are all human, and we all make mistakes.

Free Minds and Beauty Behind Bars, even the Justice Art Coalition, which I'm a part of as well, are dynamic organizations that one can be a part of to get their work out there.

Isaiah: What advice do you have for members who are currently released or they're soon to be released?

Greg: I strongly encourage those who are coming out and those who are out: stay the course and persevere.

Isaiah: I want to thank you so much for taking time out of your day to do this interview for our Reentry Profile. Everything you said was amazing!

CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- ★ CR, EB, JK and JAM started Georgetown college classes.
- ★ EB and MHO earned his GED.
- ★ HC was elected as the new D1AANC Commissioner at the DC Jail.
- ★ JG, LE and MAR were granted early termination for their probation.
- ★ JGR was promoted to a supervisor role at his job.

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!

DC PHOTOS *By Neha*

As requested by our readers



Pantheria Communitaria, a collective means of free food distribution, located in the Petworth neighborhood in Northwest



D.C. Scenery- Sprawling vines cover the side of brick building



A colorful mural behind a storefront on U Street



The colorful Ice 'n Slice Eatery on the intersection of Shepherd and Georgia Avenue in Petworth

DC PHOTOS *By Neha*

As requested by our readers



A street corner in Chinatown



The Park Rd and 13th Street corner in the Columbia Heights neighborhood



Carnegie Library Apple Store located on K St. NW

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

REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hello everyone, glad to be back in communication with you all again so soon! As we head into fall, I hope that this new season brings a refreshing outlook on your hopes, goals, dreams and aspirations. For this month's theme, Empathy & Compassion, I would like to express myself poetically, so here we go!

Empathy and Compassion, can you really have one without the other?

I would say no, that's like peanut with no butter
Compassion and empathy best friends for life
Empathy and compassion together they fight
Fight for what, you may wonder
They fight to not be put asunder
Together they must stay, vibing off one another
Working together like lightning and thunder
Succoring hearts and minds like a warm grandmother
Compassion and empathy you're what the world needs
Empathy and compassion to you I plead
Please consider working some overtime
not just your typical 9-5
Cause what the world needs now is love sweet love
And you reflect that like a hand in a glove
Compassion and empathy please never rest
You have the power to make people their best

Thank you for indulging me and now here are some helpful organizations to connect with on your reentry journey!
Rebecca profiled their cash assistance program in this issue but they do so much more! Check out Paying It Forward on page 27.

Bread for the City
1700 Marion Barry Avenue, SE
Washington DC, 20020
202-561-8687



From their website:

Bread for the City cares about the well-being of the community. In addition to offering several community programs, social workers assist with problem-solving and link friends and neighbors with appropriate resources.

This program provides:

- Employment services
- Life skills coaching
- Case management
- Workshops
- Job placement

Bread for the City's Pre-Employment program works closely

with unemployed and underemployed clients by providing a continuum of life management and job readiness training services that are individualized, holistic and goal specific.

Job Readiness Workshops operate for five weeks, with classes held twice weekly. Workshop topics include: resume and cover letter writing, job search strategies, interviewing skills, work ethics, time management, interpersonal and communication skills, and job retention.

Case Managers conduct initial assessments for clients new to the program. They lead clients in individualized goal setting and in the development of clients' individual life skills/work readiness plans. Case Managers provide direct weekly support to clients. In addition, they provide information and referrals to appropriate programs to help clients achieve goals. Case Managers also meet with prospective employers and job training/placement programs in support of participants' progress toward successful employment.

Life Skills Coaching, volunteer mentors, called Life Skills Coaches, work individually with each client via telephone, email, and meetings at BFC's Southeast Center. They help clients develop the skills they are learning in class and reinforce the support and direction that clients receive from their case managers. Life Skills Coaches edit resumes and cover letters, teach clients how to conduct Internet job searches, conduct mock interviews and more. Most importantly, coaches provide our clients with the sense of support and confidence they need to truly enter the workforce.

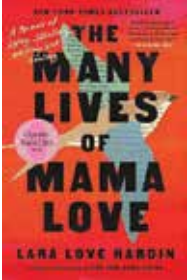
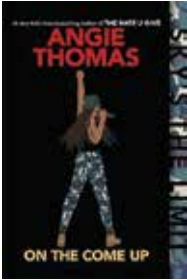
Once the clients reach graduation, they enter our workforce development program to put their new skills into action. They help connect graduates with job opportunities, and we even offer paid internships for graduates right here at Bread for the City. Last year, 71% of graduates found work, or entered an educational/job training program.

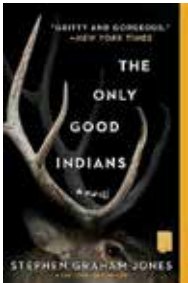
Bread for the City clients benefit from additional programs that are critical to helping students meet their basic human needs while they gain the necessary skills to find employment. In addition to our clothing closet that provides students with appropriate interview apparel, our medical clinic provides free job physicals to enable students to complete job applications.

Okay fam, until we *Connect* again
Ms. Keela

BAM BOOK BALLOT

Alright Free Minds readers, get your voting pencils ready because it is time to choose the first Books Across the Miles book for 2026! Our last BAM book for 2025 will be *The Many Lives of Mama Love: A Memoir of Lying, Stealing, Writing, and Healing* by Lara Love Hardin! But if you haven't already cast your vote on this ballot, please write to us with your 1st, 2nd, and 3rd choices from the list below.

1		<i>The Many Lives of Mama Love: A Memoir of Lying, Stealing, Writing, and Healing</i> by Lara Love Hardin [Memoir] 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.
2		<i>On the Come Up</i> by Angie Thomas [Young Adult] 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.
3		<i>Deaf Republic: A Lyric Essay</i> by Ilya Kaminsky [Poetry] 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.

4		<i>Home Fire</i> by Kamila Shamsie [Fiction] 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?
5		<i>They Called Me a Lioness: A Palestinian Girl's Fight for Freedom</i> by Ahed Tamimi and Dena Tarruri [Memoir] 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.
6		<i>The Only Good Indians</i> by Stephen Graham Jones [Horror] <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.

First Choice _____

Second Choice _____

Third Choice _____

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: PASSION (VOLUME 14, ISSUE 5)

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on **Passion**. We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 15, Issue 1 will be exploring the theme of **Animal Kingdom**.

(1)

Recall a memory when you first engaged in an activity you love (for example, playing a specific game, writing beats, listening to music, playing sports, collecting something, learning a language, learning about history or culture, painting/drawing, singing, and/or teaching others). What was it like to discover this passion of yours? Write a poem about this activity using your answers.

(2)

Creativity is a natural part of being human. What do you think there is to learn from trying creative activities (like art, music, writing, acting, and dancing) and having patience with yourself while doing so? Write an essay describing a time when you tried something new and what the experience was like.

(3)

Is there someone with a specific skill, interest, or hobby that inspires you? Describe why you are drawn to this person, and what you might be able to learn from their commitment to their passion. Write a poem about this person and why they inspire you.

(4)

Create a list of five interests you would pursue if you had all the time and resources in the world. Go through and break each activity into steps. What do you already have (skills, knowledge, or resources) that might help you pursue this activity, even on a smaller scale or at a beginner level? Write an essay using your answers.

(5)

Fill in the blank: Self-Discovery

Past

Since I was young, I liked to _____.

I have always loved _____.

I have always wanted to _____.

The last time I tried something new was _____.

It made me feel like _____.

Present

In my free time, I like to _____.

I like to read about _____.

I like to talk about _____ with my friends/peers/family.

Right now, I have the time to _____.

Right now, I have the space to _____.

Future

If I had all the time in the world, I would _____.

If I had all the money in the world, I would _____.

If I had all the space in the world, I would _____.

If I could try out any new hobby, I would _____.

I think it would make me feel _____.

I can start doing these activities/hobbies now by _____.

REAL WORLD OF WORK: DELANDO – A BEACON FOR THE YOUTH

Interview by Jennifer

Delando is a very busy member - focused on achieving the professional goal he set for himself during his 15 years of incarceration: helping young people not just survive the challenges Delando overcame, but actually *thrive* as they navigate adolescence and young adulthood.

For most of 2025, Delando has been honoring that commitment in his capacity as a **Youth Engagement Specialist** working overnight to welcome, support, and guide the 18-24 year olds who come to the only low-barrier emergency youth shelter in DC. He's also been advancing through a months-long application process to become a Youth Development Representative at the New Beginnings Youth Development Center - the residential facility for DYRS-committed youth in the city, which can feel like a 2nd job with all the screenings, paperwork, and interviews. While I was sad that he had a stomach bug, I was grateful that his day off provided some time to discuss how empathy and compassion play a critical role in his work - after he was feeling better, of course!

Can you tell me about your job?

I work with the young adults who come looking for a safe, supportive place to stay. We're open from 8pm to 8am and considered a "low-barrier" emergency shelter because we make it easy for the young people who need shelter, food, showers and longer-term housing resources to be able to spend the night with us.

What's a typical work day for you?

There is no such thing as a typical day! You never know what's going to happen because you never know who is going to walk in the door - and I like it that way. I've been there for 7 months and my shift is 6pm-2am. We usually open at 8pm and the kids leave at 8am, but if it's too hot or too cold outside we're open 24 hours.

Sometimes I work at the front desk, which is not my favorite role because it involves a lot of paperwork, logistics, and data entry. I prefer the roles that let me to float around and engage more with the kids, like serving food, hooking games up to the TV, managing medications, running groups, and having one-on-one conversations with individuals.

What kind of groups do you run?

We have different groups based on the needs of the kids staying there. For example, when we noticed some kids being too tired to take showers after spending long days outside, I led a session on hygiene - specifically the importance of appearance and perception. I asked questions like, "if you're job hunting or needing to talk with other people, how do you expect someone to even have a conversation when you have a strong odor?" I put everything in the context of being healthy, avoiding disease, and just taking good care of themselves, but I do this with compassion so that they understand the advice is coming from a caring place. If they need anything concerning hygiene, I will get it for them. I feel a lot of emotions in this job - I don't do this for the check.

But we also have "open floor" discussions and other ways to let the kids advocate for what they need. For example, after I ran a group, one young man asked to talk with me one-on-one. He was stressing due to family responsibilities - and shared how hard it was to feel

like he needed to be "Mr. Fix It" for his family. I could tell that he wants to do the right thing, but doesn't know how. I don't always have to have all the answers, but I can listen to them, let them know I know how they feel, and provide advice.

In addition to compassion, how do you use empathy in your job?

I really understand the pain and confusion so many of the kids are experiencing. I can easily remember when I was their age, I didn't have anyone in my life guiding me through challenges and helping me make smart decisions. I can really relate to them and share my story saying things like, "for most of the 15 years I was in jail I felt stuck. You probably feel the same way right now." And I encourage them to focus on the good since they're still in a situation with opportunities to make it better.

In particular, the young guys come to me for guidance in how to be a man. They see me as a role model and I let them know that everyone goes through something. I tell the guys to think of these challenges as getting your reps in now so you're more prepared for harder situations to come.

What is a challenge in this work?

Sometimes I wish I didn't feel so much. I had a coworker who just saw this as a job and didn't look at the kids with empathy. But because I understand them and have been through similar things, I hurt for them.

For example, one of the girls who comes in regularly is just 19 years old and engages in substance use. During her intake search one night, we found paraphernalia in her bag. She and I had a long, honest conversation about it. Then I didn't see her for a while, but when she came back she explained that she had stopped using and was proud. This made me so happy for her - and personally it reminded me of a close family member who also engaged in substance use her whole life. I know it would be easier if I didn't care, but I can't switch it off - I can't change me.

What advice do you have for members who want to do similar work?

Don't do the job if you don't have a passion for helping the youth and don't have the patience to help them tackle their issues. But if you have patience and passion and you want better things for this generation than you had, then this is a great profession. However, you need to be prepared for an emotional roller coaster!

Closing

I was grateful for the time Delando took to share with me anecdotes about the young people he works with and why he does this job. I think it's appropriate that the facility is called "Sanctuary" because Delando's passion for helping young people certainly makes it a place of refuge, where they can get so much more than just shelter, snacks, and a shower for a night. They are so fortunate because they also get Delando's empathy and compassion which last much longer...



JUST LAW: KNOW YOUR RIGHTS: CHILD SUPPORT AND INCARCERATION

By Aneka

Hi fam,

Did you know that if you are an incarcerated **DC Resident** and have a child support order in DC, you can pause your child support payments until you are released? Check out this flyer below provided by Legal Aid DC to see what steps you need to take to stop your payments!

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Child Support and Incarceration

If you are a DC resident who is incarcerated, you can suspend child support payments during your incarceration. Suspension of child support is **not automatic** – you must file a motion with the court requesting that your child support order be reduced to \$0 while you are incarcerated.

Who Qualifies?

In order to qualify to have your child support suspended during incarceration, you must:

- Be the payor
- Have a DC child support order
- Be currently incarcerated
- Have or will be incarcerated for more than 30 days



REMEMBER: You should file your motion as soon as possible! The court can only reduce your child support payments starting on the day you file.

Contact Legal Aid DC by Mail for Help

In your letter, please include:

- Your full name
- Your date of birth
- Your inmate ID number
- The name of the facility
- The full name and date of birth of the other parent(s) in the child support case(s)
- The full name(s) and date(s) of birth of the child or children involved in the case
- Yes/no on permission to share your information



Send Mail To:
Legal Aid DC
1331 H Street NW
Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005
Attn: Child Support

If Legal Aid isn't able to help you, we may want to ask another organization or the DC Office of the Attorney General to assist instead. We would only share your information to connect you with free legal help or to tell the DC Office of the Attorney General you are incarcerated.

Please let us know whether you do or do not give this permission by writing: "I **DO / DO NOT** give Legal Aid DC consent to share my information with the DC Office of the Attorney General and other legal organizations."

CONOCE TUS DERECHOS

Manutención y Encarcelamiento

Si eres un residente de DC que está encarcelado, puedes suspender los pagos de manutención infantil durante tu encarcelamiento. La suspensión de la manutención infantil **no es automática** – debes presentar una solicitud ante el tribunal solicitando que se reduzca tu orden de manutención a \$0 mientras estás encarcelado.

¿Quién Califica?

Para calificar para que se suspenda el pago de manutención infantil durante la encarcelación, debes:

- Ser el pagador
- Tener una orden de manutención infantil de DC
- Estar actualmente encarcelado
- Haber sido o estar encarcelado por más de 30 días



RECUERDA: ¡Debes presentar tu solicitud lo antes posible! El tribunal solo puede reducir los pagos de manutención infantil a partir del día en que presentas la solicitud.

Contacta Legal Aid DC por correo para ayuda

En tu carta, por favor incluye:

- Su nombre completo
- Su fecha de nacimiento
- Su número de identificación de preso
- El nombre de la instalación
- El nombre completo y la fecha de nacimiento del otro padre en el caso de manutención infantil
- El nombre completo y la fecha de nacimiento del niño involucrado en el caso
- Su permiso si/síno podemos compartir su información



Envía correo a:
Legal Aid DC
1331 H Street NW
Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005
Attn: Child Support

Si Legal Aid no puede ayudarte, es posible que queramos pedirle a otra organización o a la Oficina del Fiscal General de DC que te asista en su lugar. Solo compartiremos tu información para conectarte con ayuda legal gratuita o para informar a la Oficina del Fiscal General de DC que estás encarcelado.

Por favor, haznos saber si das o no das este permiso escribiendo: "**DOY / NO DOY** consentimiento a Legal Aid DC para compartir mi información con la Oficina del Fiscal General de DC y otras organizaciones legales."

legal
aid dc

This information was updated in July 2025

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

PAYING IT FORWARD: BREAD FOR THE CITY'S CASHRX

By Rebecca



A hallmark of many nonprofit organizations is the centering of empathy and compassion in how they work to create positive change. This is undoubtedly the case for the DC nonprofit Bread for the City (BFC). BFC works to reduce the burden of poverty in DC by acting as a one-stop shop for comprehensive services, including medical, legal, and social services alongside their food pantries in NW and SE Washington, DC. In addition, BFC does advocacy work to target the root causes of poverty via workforce development, local budget work, and coalition building. In the fall of 2023, under the wing of the social services division, BFC's Economic Security Team launched a unique cash transfer pilot program called CashRx. Funded by a grant focused on health equity, CashRx provides its 14 participants with monthly, no strings attached cash payments for two years. (The 14 participants were selected by lottery from a pool of BFC's medical clients living with the chronic health conditions of uncontrolled diabetes, high blood pressure, or major depression.) Program participants are free to use these cash payments in whatever way they see fit, and, unlike most cash transfer programs that give the same amount of cash to all participants, CashRx participants are the ones who set the monthly amount of cash they receive. While CashRx is BFC's first in-house cash transfer program, BFC isn't new to the cash giving game. For at least a decade, BFC has provided small cash amounts through their program Small Favors, and during the pandemic, BFC was a part of Thrive East of the River, a partnership of BFC and three other DC agencies that provided emergency pandemic aid of \$5,500 to 600 participants in Wards 7 and 8, in addition to wraparound services like grocery delivery and help navigating local resources, like the unemployment system. After their experience with Thrive East of the River, it was clear to BFC that giving cash works, and this understanding led to the creation of CashRx.

"The participants of CashRx are the experts of their own lives. That encapsulates our feeling that they know what to do with the money and everyone has different goals and priorities and they are the experts."

Brittany, BFC's Economic Security Supervisor, shared that CashRx participants are not required to keep records of what they spend the monthly cash on. Participants do engage in quarterly check-ins just to talk and share how the cash has been helpful to them. Brittany added that BFC is able to numerically measure the program's impact by tracking specific health metrics, like A1C numbers, blood pressure numbers, or how someone is scoring on the depression assessment questionnaire. The other primary data the program is collecting is the stories of the participants and their experiences in the program. As Brittany explains it, CashRx is "a demonstration project because we want to do a deep dive into each of the 14 participants to show ... where they started, [and] how their lives and their health and their goals have changed over the course of the two years."

When it comes to the program's impacts and outcomes, the benefits are plentiful and immediate. Daisy, BFC's Economic Security Fellow, conducts the quarterly check-ins with the CashRx participants, and she said that for the first few months in the program, most participants "are

catching up on late bills. They're taking care of emergencies. I saw a lot of car repairs. People were driving cars in dangerous conditions, but they couldn't afford to take care of their brakes or their transmission." Then, Daisy explained, once the first few months have passed, "people are primarily using the funds to, first and foremost, take care of their rent. So in those first few check-ins, they come in and they just have a sense of joy over ... the security they feel about knowing that no matter what, they have this cash and that their rent will be covered." After rent, the next focus is food. As Daisy puts it, "It's primarily food and housing insecurity that just go away, essentially." In addition to the tangible impacts of this new security, mental well-being is also much higher after a participant's first few months in the program. Daisy has also observed that, across all participants, people will use the cash to help loved ones and neighbors. Additionally, participants have shared about being able to re-engage in activities that they hadn't been able to afford to do. One CashRx participant expressed her joy at being able to take her grandkids bowling. She loves to bowl but just hadn't had the money to go. Brittany said the hope with the deep dive case studies of each program participant is to show the "full, well-rounded impact that goes beyond tables and numbers."

Something BFC wants to prove with this project is that this program can be replicated by other federally qualified health centers, both in DC and across the country. Brittany clarifies that BFC knows cash isn't going to solve everything, as legislative policies are needed to break down the systemic conditions that foster and maintain poverty, "but cash does help in amazing ways, in ways that we didn't even imagine when we designed this project." Current CashRx participants have expressed their wish that everyone could receive cash to support their health needs, and it is certainly BFC's desire to make a "prescription for cash" available to all of its medical patients. Making that desire a reality comes down to funding. "We need the investment of those who believe in this work as well to help us reach that goal," said Brittany. One important method for attracting the monetary investment needed to continue and expand CashRx is for supporters to use their voices. "We just want to get people out there talking about it," Brittany explained. While studies of similar cash transfer pilots across the country confirm the positive outcomes of programs like CashRx, it's up to community members to speak out and fight for these programs to exist. That can look like joining coalitions, contacting DC councilmembers, and encouraging friends in other states to contact their Congressional representatives in support of cash transfer programs. In addition to BFC being part of multiple organizations that fight for economic security initiatives and effective policy change, CashRx participants have shared their experiences on some big stages and Brittany and Daisy have testified to the DC Council. Brittany likes to encourage people to think about the ripple effects of programs like CashRx. "What would happen if everyone had enough food and had the resources they needed?...What would the positive effects be on [individuals] and their families and the community at large?" In reflecting on the pandemic, Brittany acknowledged that it was a scary time, but it was also a time where people leaned into the importance of mutual aid, assistance, and community care. "Now that the public health emergency is over, keep up with the community care," Brittany urged. "Think of what our society and our community could be if the level of resources and care that was given [during the pandemic] continued today."

You can learn more about Bread for the City and get their contact info in the Reentry Corner on page 20. For more information on CashRx, visit www.breadfortheconomy.org/economic-security/



THE WRITE WAY: USING COMPASSION TO CREATE ENGAGING FICTION

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

By Grace

Compassion is one of the most important things a writer can attempt to evoke in their readers. By making readers interested in our main characters' lives—whether that character is the narrator of a poem or the protagonist of a novel—we can ensure readers will stay invested in their outcomes and read to the last word. Here are some tips you can use to create portrayals of characters that your audience will come to love.

Writing Loveability and Humanity

In his book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, bestselling author Stephen King says, *"The job of building characters in fiction boils down to two things: paying attention to how the real people around you behave, and then telling the truth about what you see."* To write a character readers will empathize with, draw from things you've noticed about the people you love and the people in your environment. We often make judgments about people based on their actions, so give your readers the tools to do the same about your characters. Showing a human detail like the way someone always tucks a napkin into their shirt before they eat will characterize a protagonist as careful or, perhaps, precise, more gracefully than simply using one of those words to describe your character in exposition would.

Growing Your Character

Another way we can invest our readers in the outcomes of our characters is by having them change for the better in our writing. An easy way we can do this is by giving our characters a flaw. Character flaws should make us relate to and understand our characters better, and without weaknesses, our characters won't have room to grow. One shortcut to creating a character flaw is to take a character's strength and make the flipside of it their weakness. Maybe your character is positive and easygoing; people love to hang out with them, but the character also struggles to be taken seriously. Maybe they're highly competent, but struggle with social awkwardness, or are kind hearted, but naive. Maybe your character is hardworking and driven—and they get frustrated with people who aren't.

Often in stories, characters are lacking one of three things: competence, influence, or resolve. A lack of competence is a common flaw for characters in action movies and fantasy stories. By having a character undergo lessons or training over the course of your

narrative, they will grow to eventually defeat your story's antagonist. A character who lacks influence will learn to communicate better to reach their goals, and a character without resolve will eventually find a purpose that motivates them. By showing changes in our characters from the beginning to the ending of a piece—perhaps showing them react to similar challenges or situations differently—we satisfy our readers and fulfil the promise of a worthwhile story we set up in our openings.

Compassionate Characterization

Compassion isn't just something we want our readers to feel for our characters; we also want to show compassion for our readers. Another tip Stephen King shares in *On Writing* is that it's important not to reduce our characters to tropes or harmful stereotypes. He writes: *"[I]n real life we each of us regard ourselves as the main character, the protagonist. If you can bring this attitude into your fiction, you may not find it easier to create brilliant characters, but it will be harder for you to create the sort of one-dimensional dopes that populate so much of pop fiction."*

To be compassionate to our audiences, when we write about characters who don't share our lived experiences, we should do so with respect. Avoid "punching down" or, in other words, criticizing or making jokes about marginalized groups you aren't a part of (as opposed to "punching up," which refers to writing critically about people in power). If you aren't aware of common stereotypes to avoid, the easiest way to write a respectful portrayal is to ask for someone of a background you don't share to read your writing and point out anything that may put off future readers. We might not have access to all of the people we want to advise us; in this case it's best to conduct research. Read, watch, or listen to first-person accounts told or created by people who have the life experience you're looking to write about. By doing this, you will not only get their perspective on the topic that's inspiring you, but you will also learn the answers to questions you may not have thought of.

These tips are meant to be used as a resource to provide some insight into how you might incorporate compassion and empathy into your writing. We would love to know what you think of this advice. Have fun, and happy writing!

BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH PAPER AND PEN: WHY FREE MINDS VOLUNTEERS WRITE LETTERS

by Sofia

Hey Free Minds Family! Since starting with Free Minds as an intern back in the summer of 2021, one of my favorite parts about being a part of the family has been writing letters to many of you behind the wall. I've had the chance to connect with several of you through letter writing and it's been an honor to get to know one another from what I feel like is a dying art. If I'll be honest, I think the last time I had written a letter to someone before my time at Free Minds was for a class project in middle school.

Writing letters creates a unique connection between the writer and recipient. We go through extra layers of filtering and finding the perfect words to express ourselves rather than just talking to someone, and I find that I'm more intentional when I write a letter than in more casual forms of communicating, like texting. I also find that writing the hard things out can be easier than saying them out loud. Through writing letters to you all, I have found that people are way more similar than we think, and that we all experience (to different levels of course and in different contexts) fear, joy, grief, stress, love, and the whole range of human emotions.

Our letter-writing team at Free Minds is made up of compassionate volunteers of all different backgrounds, and located all around the country. We meet weekly on Monday nights over Zoom (a video conferencing platform) and these volunteers have helped to build a special community. Seeing their smiling faces in the glow of their computer screens, and hearing their answers to sometimes silly and oddly specific icebreaker questions is always a great start to the week. I began co-facilitating the Letter Writer's Circle in the summer of 2023. Even in between my time of interning and returning as a full time staff member, I always found time to join the Letter Writer's Circle when I could. Our volunteers, despite all coming from different backgrounds, always show up in their letters with vulnerability, authenticity, and a compassionate curiosity, which is why I thought I would ask them all what made them volunteer with Free Minds, and if they have any particular memories that stand out to them from their time volunteering. Some of their answers are below, and you may recognize their names! Do you have any special memories writing letters to our volunteers or staff? Write to us and let us know! Make sure to write letters to our office so you can have the opportunity to connect with our volunteers or staff; we'd love to hear from you!

Why do you volunteer with Free Minds?

Annie: I love being a part of the Free Minds community. It almost seems like magic the way Free Minds allows those of us on the outside to have such meaningful conversations with those on the inside, whether it be through poetry or the exchange of letters.

Kathryn: Volunteering with Free Minds allows me to connect with people I wouldn't normally have the chance to!

Bill: I volunteer with Free Minds because it is an organization based on community and recognizing the shared humanity of people from strikingly different life situations. I enjoy Write Night because I appreciate the power and art of so much of the poetry and because I am happy to have the opportunity to show respect and recognition for the incarcerated poets. I value the Letter Writers Circle because it introduces me to so many interesting people and again, because it's an opportunity to demonstrate the community that embraces us all.

Barbara: I volunteer with Free Minds because it is something I can do to help make the world a better place. The carceral system is uncaring and cold. But I do care, and I want to bring some kindness into the life of a fellow human being.

Melissa: I enjoy writing in solidarity with people.

Saeed: I believe that the circumstances of our upbringing, from within the home to systemic implications, dictating our socioeconomic roles in society, dramatically affect and shift the course of our lives. I've personally grown up with great privilege and acknowledge that had I not, my life, including the decisions I would have made and the perspectives I would have, would have been very different. It is because of this I strongly advocate for societal reform and promotion of art through Free Minds as a medium of systemic change and flourishing.

Do you have a particular memory or example of your time volunteering with Free Minds that sticks out to you?

Annie: One time I received a letter from a Free Minds member who had been in solitary for more than three months. He told me that he read the last letter I'd written to him every day and it helped him get through his time in isolation. I was stunned to imagine such cruel treatment and humbled that my letter had proved useful.

Bill: The occasions when I've been able to meet, on the outside, people with whom I'd exchanged letters, well...that's a special feeling that is hard to put into words.

Barbara: It's not one memory, but the constant expressions of appreciation from members. I'm grateful I can do something that has that kind of impact.

Saeed: I recall reading a poem written by a young woman. She wrote from prison about her horse back home that she missed dearly. I was reminded how disconnected from the Earth and nature jail is, how it could harden the heart rather than teaching kindness, which is the opposite of what prison claims to do. This woman longing for her farmland and horse back home communicated a grief to me that I'd never felt before. I was reminded of why poetry matters.

IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

DEEP DIVE: HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

A member of Congress, either a Senator or a Representative, conceives of a bill, either alone or with co-authors. The contents of that bill might be inspired by an idea that the Congressperson had, or they might have gotten from their constituents, or from people paid to shape what happens in politics; those people are known as lobbyists, and they might represent a certain industry (like pharmaceutical drugs) or a cause (like civil rights).

Both chambers of Congress have various committees made up of its members, and those committees focus on a group of issues or the business of specific government agencies. When a bill is introduced into Congress, it is immediately routed to the committee that "has jurisdiction," meaning it is the committee that deals with potential laws related to the bill's topic. For example: if someone introduces a bill to create a job training program, that will end up being considered by the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee in the Senate and the Education and Labor Committee in the House.

Once a bill is in the Committee, it will be up to the committee's leadership whether to move it into the pipeline. That means very little will be considered unless it is authored entirely by the majority party in that chamber, or is bipartisan, meaning it has support from members of both parties.

If committee leaders want to consider a bill, it will be scheduled for what's called a "markup," where members will have an opportunity to offer amendments or changes to it before the committee votes. And if a majority of the committee members vote for a bill, it then moves to the full chamber of Congress. Here again, the leadership of the majority party has a lot of power around when a vote might get scheduled and how much debate will be allowed, or if more amendments can be considered.

In order for a bill to become a law, it must be signed off on by both the Senate and the House of Representatives. So eventually each chamber has to vote on it. Sometimes that involves two unique but related bills moving through the different chambers, in which case there will be what's called a "conference committee" that is created to negotiate the differences between the bills. More often though, one chamber moves a bill through to passage and then the other chamber takes that bill and votes on it as well.

In the House of Representatives, a bill passes if it receives a simple majority. There are 435 members of the House, so if they are all there, you need 218 yes votes for passage.

In the Senate it's trickier. Technically, it's the same deal, majority rules, but Senators are able to conduct what's known



United States Capitol where Congress meets

as a filibuster to prevent a bill from moving to a vote. This used to mean a Senator would stand up and actually read the phone book or just talk for hours and hours to stop the process; now, a member just needs to invoke a filibuster.

There are 100 Senators, and you need 60 of them to be on board in order to avoid a filibuster. And in the political climate we're in today, that means you need 60 votes to pass virtually any bill.

When a bill passes both the House and the Senate, it then moves to the desk of the president of the United States. And the president has 10 days to decide whether he or she wants to sign the bill, making it an official law, or veto the bill, meaning he disagrees with the bill becoming a law. The president can also choose to do nothing, which if Congress is in session means it becomes a law by default. If Congress is out of session during those 10 days and the president doesn't act, the bill dies, which is known as a "pocket veto."

When a president vetoes legislation, Congress can override that decision, but it is incredibly hard. In order to override the veto and pass the law, two-thirds of the House and the Senate need to vote for the override.

So that is the full legislative process for a bill to become a law. Very few of thousands of pieces of legislation offered up every year will actually wind their way even past the first step of this process. The current Congress - the 119th, sworn in last January - has had 10,268 bills introduced, but only seen 36 of those bills move forward to enactment.

WORLD

Nearly two years to the day after a Hamas attack inside of Israel triggered war between the two, a ceasefire brokered with strong influence by the United States has been reached. The hope is that this agreement will pave the way towards a lasting peace.

Much remains to be seen as to whether both sides will meet

IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

their obligations on the road to a new future in the region. Already, the remainder of the 20 living Israeli hostages held by Hamas have been freed, as have been more than 1,000 Palestinian hostages held by Israel. Israel has also begun to retreat its position in Gaza back to an agreed upon line that generally splits the territory in half.

Phase two will consist of further exchanges of hostages (including the bodies of those who have died) and incremental withdrawal from Gaza by Israel. Phase three entails the substantial post-war reconstruction of Gaza, much of which has been reduced to rubble, along with demilitarization of Hamas.

Philippines, a nation of more than 115 million people and thousands of islands, has been rocked over the course of the past two months by a spate of powerful earthquakes. The first, a "shallow quake" on September 30 that registered 6.9 on the Richter scale, claimed the lives of more than 70 people and induced widespread structural damage across the country, including to thousands of schools. Less than two weeks later, two more earthquakes (including one of 7.4 magnitude) triggered further damage across certain regions. A tsunami warning went immediately into effect for the Philippines and other countries in the region, but fortunately, no significant waves developed.

On September 25, young people flooded the streets of Madagascar, an African island nation of 32 million, protesting the quality of the power grid and water system. In what has come to be known as the Gen Z Protests, their movement has expanded to broader criticisms around poverty, corruption and more. An elite faction of the nation's military has joined the protesters, which triggered a declaration of a coup attempt by the sitting government. The president of Madagascar, Andry Rajoelina, has fled the nation for his own safety.

NATION

The U.S. government officially shut down on October 1 after Congress failed to reach an agreement to at least temporarily fund its operation. In order to reopen, both the House and Senate will need to agree upon either a temporary funding agreement - known as a continuing resolution - or legislation that funds the government until October of 2026.

The House of Representatives has already passed a continuing resolution, and is currently not in session. At the heart of this standoff is the Senate, where the majority of Democrats have insisted on new health care funding before they'll agree to reopen. That health care funding comes in the

form of subsidies to cover a portion of insurance premiums for people who buy coverage on the federal marketplace. If action is not taken by December, millions of people in the country could see their premiums skyrocket.

As we write this Free Minds news update, there appears to be no end in sight to the shutdown given that neither the White House nor Congressional Republicans have met with the minority to discuss a potential settlement.

In our last installment of FM News, we discussed the recent deployment of National Guard troops as well as a significant presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the District of Columbia. Since then, the president has begun similar actions in Memphis, Tennessee and Chicago, Illinois. A planned deployment of forces in Portland, Oregon has been blocked temporarily by a federal judge until the court can decide on a challenge to the legality of the action.

DC

In the past few months Congressional Republicans have introduced a number of bills that threaten DC's autonomy (ability to govern itself). Many of these bills also introduce changes to DC's criminal legal system and crucial legislation. Things are changing daily, but as of the time of this article there are a few bills that have passed the House and are waiting to be voted on in the Senate, and others that have been introduced in the House but have yet to be voted on by the full House of Representatives. A bill does not become a law until it has passed both the Senate and the House and has been signed by the president. **None of these bills have become laws yet.** Many people and organizations in DC are working hard to protect DC's autonomy and preserve DC's existing laws and policies. Free Minds Changemakers have been educating the public and lawmakers about the true impact and importance of DC laws such as the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act and Youth Rehabilitation Act.

The following bills have passed the House (but have not yet been voted on in the Senate):

- H.R. 4922: restricts DC's power over criminal sentencing laws, and lowers the maximum age for the YRA to age 18.
- H.R. 5140: lowers the age at which a minor may be tried as an adult for certain criminal offenses to 14 years of age.
- H.R. 5125: abolishes the DC Judicial Nomination Commission and grants the president sole authority to nominate DC judges.
- H.R. 5143: enables dangerous high speed vehicular pursuits by law enforcement in DC.
- H.R. 2056: undoes DC's Sanctuary Values Amendment Act. This means that DC cannot act on its own authority as related to immigration.

- H.R. 884: disenfranchises DC residents who are non-citizens but meet other residency requirements from voting in local elections.
- H.R. 2096: allows DC's Metropolitan Police Department to rehire officers who commit serious crimes.

The following bills have been introduced in the House but not yet voted on:

- H.R. 5242/S. 2815: repeals DC's Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act of 2016 and DC's Second Chance Amendment Act of 2022. This repeal would only apply to crimes committed after the bill is signed into law. Anyone currently incarcerated would still be able to benefit from IRAA.
- H.R. 5172: increases or establishes mandatory minimum sentences for a number of offenses.
- H.R. 5214: increases pre-trial detention and requires cash bail for a range of alleged offenses.
- H.R. 5179: removes DC's elected Attorney General and grants the president sole authority to nominate a replacement.
- H.R. 5103: establishes a federal commission to oversee DC immigration and criminal enforcement.
- H.R. 5107: repeals DC's Comprehensive Policing and Justice Reform Amendment Act of 2022.
- H.R. 5163: makes it illegal to camp on public property in DC, essentially criminalizing homelessness.
- H.R. 5181: reduces funding to DC public schools in order to expand a federal voucher program.
- H.R. 5183: upends DC's local legislative process by requiring a 60-day Congressional review period for all legislation and allows a line-item veto, among other changes.

*Bill synopsis credit: Free DC

Please note that at the time of this writing, none of these bills have become law.

SPORTS

We are about one-third of the way through the NFL schedule, and it has been a season full of surprises. The Ravens, projected to be a Super Bowl contender, have one win to their name. The Chiefs, who have been to the last three Super Bowls, are 3-3 and have as many losses as they did all of last year. Meanwhile, the Indianapolis Colts, picked by many to finish last in their division, are 5-1 and have scored the most points of any team in the league. The Commanders were somewhat stymied by an injury to their young superstar quarterback, Jayden Daniels, that caused him to miss two starts. Its top wide receiver, Terry McLaurin, has also been limited by injuries.



Terry McLaurin,
wide receiver for
the Washington
Commanders

The Major League Baseball regular season was not kind to the local teams: both the Baltimore Orioles and Washington Nationals finished dead last in their respective divisions. As we write this, the battle for the American League and National League titles are both underway.

Each series features a team that has never won a World Series. In the National League, the Milwaukee Brewers are vying against the defending champion Los Angeles Dodgers for their second World Series appearance (they lost to the St. Louis Cardinals in the 1982 Fall Classic). In the American League, the Seattle Mariners are up against the Toronto Blue Jays for a chance to make their first appearance in the World Series since the teams' founding in 1977.

This October in the WNBA, the Las Vegas Aces swept the Phoenix Mercury to claim their third championship in four years. They did not trail once in Game 4 of the series, defeating the Mercury 97-86, led by a stellar performance from reigning MVP A'ja Wilson, who was named Finals MVP.



A'ja Wilson,
basketball player for
the Las Vegas Aces

In the NWSL, the regular season is winding down and as of this writing, the top two seeds are locked in, with Kansas City Current and DC's own Washington Spirit claiming first and second place as we head into the playoffs. The remaining playoff spots are still to be determined, but the Spirit will hope to return to the Championship in November, where they fell last year in a 1-0 loss to the Orlando Pride. However, the Kansas City Current have already set a record for most points in a season, with two games left to play in the regular season. The question remains: will anyone be able to neutralize the Current and reigning MVP and Golden Boot leader Temwa Chawinga?

MEDITATION: EMPATHY LIVES IN ME – A GUIDED MEDITATION *By Kelli*

Have you read *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson? If not, I hope you'll put it on your list. It's one of the most powerful books I've ever read. Stevenson, a civil rights lawyer, tells the story of defending Walter McMillian, a man who was wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death in Alabama. But the book isn't just about one case. It's about the deep injustices built into our legal system, and one man's fight to do something about it.

There is a quote from the book that has stayed with me ever since I read it:

"We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent." – Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*

I love this quote. I think of it often, especially in moments when someone says or does something that frustrates or angers me. When that happens, my first instinct is to push the person away.

But then I remember that quote. When we really understand our shared brokenness, it becomes harder to write each other off. We stop seeing people as "other." I have no idea what that other person might be carrying. Maybe they're grieving. Maybe they've been let down so many times they expect the worst. Maybe they've lost hope

And I've been on the other side too. So many times, when I've not been at my best, I've said things I wish I could take back. I've let my pain spill over and hurt people I care about. I know what it feels like to need forgiveness.

But as Stevenson shows us, our shared brokenness is what connects us. Acknowledging that is empathy. I've come to believe empathy is the opposite of loneliness.

But it doesn't always come naturally. We've got to be intentional about it. So, let's practice.

You can find a partner and take turns reading this for one another, or you can simply read through it once or twice and then close your eyes and meditate upon what you have read.

Take a moment to find a comfortable seated position. Close your eyes or lower your gaze if that feels better. Allow your hands to rest gently in your lap.

Take a deep breath in... and let it out slowly.
Again... breathe in... and exhale.

Feel the air as it enters... cool and smooth.
Feel it leave your body... warm and steady.

Now, bring your attention to your heart. Not the physical beating of it, but the space where you feel love, loss, hope, or sorrow. Picture that space gently softening... like a fist slowly unclenching.

With your next breath, bring to mind someone you've struggled to understand. Or someone who's struggled to understand you. It could be someone you find difficult, or someone who challenges your patience (but we don't recommend focusing on someone who is actively harmful to you).

Now, see them as a human being: someone who, like you, has known fear, joy, confusion, and pain. Someone who, like you, has dreams, regrets, and memories.

See them not as an idea, but as a person... with skin, eyes, breath, a heartbeat.

Imagine what they might feel when they wake up.
What fears they hold.
What joy feels like for them.
What they've lost.
What they hope for.

Say silently to yourself:
Just like me, this person wants to be safe.
Just like me, this person has made mistakes.
Just like me, this person is doing their best.
Just like me, this person is trying to find their way.

Take another slow, deep breath. Let these words settle into your chest:
Just like me.

We're all carrying something. We're all broken in some way. We're all learning. Empathy doesn't excuse harm. It understands humanity.

Imagine yourself embracing this other person. Perhaps a family member that you've become estranged from.
Wrap your arms around them and hold them.
Because just like you, they feel pain...
Just like you, they feel a brokenness...
And just like you, they are trying.

Now, return to your breath, steady and present.
Say silently to yourself:
I have the power to understand others.
I can soften, without breaking.
Empathy lives in me, even here. Even now.

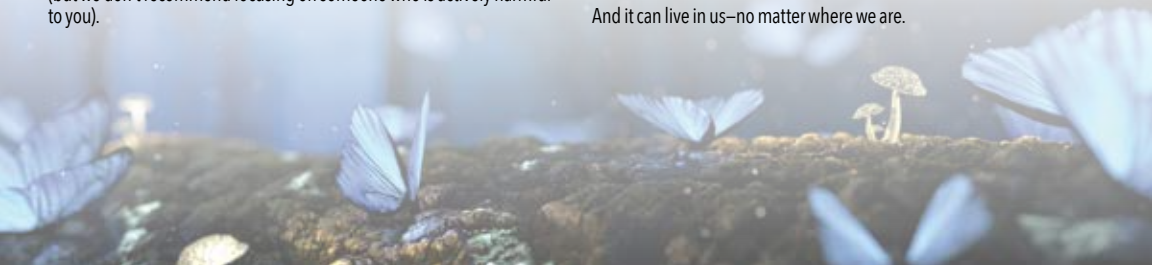
Let that empathy guide you.
Maybe to listen a little more closely.
To speak a little more kindly.
Or to show up for someone in a small but meaningful way.

Take one final breath... deeper than the ones before.
Let it fill your whole chest... and release it slowly, as if letting go of a tight grip.

When you're ready, open your eyes or lift your gaze.
Take a moment to simply be... present, aware, and connected.

Guess what? We just practiced empathy. Empathy is not a weakness.
It is a strength.

And it can live in us—no matter where we are.



AROUND THE WORLD: PUERTO RICO & THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

By Aneka



A nighttime view of one of the resort's many pools

Hey fam 🍷. It's been so long since I've taken you all on a chaotic adventure with me! In this edition of Around The World, not only will I bring you on my impromptu trip to San Juan, Puerto Rico and Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, I'm also going to share what steps to take so that you can have a wild adventure of your own once you're home! But first, let me set the scene: You've been fantasizing about clear blue skies, sandy beaches, and unlimited food and drinks that are paid for prior to your arrival. You also have two friends who had the same fantasy, so you all decided to book a last minute 3-day weekend trip to the Dominican Republic to make that magical dream a reality. Sounds fun and spontaneous right? Well that's exactly what my friends and I did this year and it was epic!

Since this was a last minute trip, the cheapest flight we were able to find had a 10 hour overnight layover in San Juan. A layover is when you make an intermediate stop at a different airport before reaching your final destination. It's recommended to book your flight at least 3-5 months ahead for international trips if you want to get a decent price, otherwise you end up with more expensive flights or cheaper flights with multiple or long layovers. Since we only had 10 hours in Puerto Rico, we decided to forgo booking a hotel for the night and instead explored San Juan's food, night life, and watched the sunrise on the beach before heading back to the airport for our early morning flight. If you're wondering what we did with our luggage while we were exploring San Juan, you'd be surprised to learn that there are several websites where you can book a "locker" in the city to leave your bags for a couple of hours while you go out and explore. I put quotes around locker because for us, the "locker" was a space on the floor in the corner of a bustling restaurant! You read that right. We had to leave our bags on the floor where they could have easily been taken at any point while we were away. But \$25 for 3 suitcases was hard to beat, so we trusted the system and hoped we'd be fine haha. Thankfully, all of our belongings were accounted for when we came to pick them up 7 hours later!

Once we landed in Punta Cana that afternoon, we took the free hotel shuttle to our all-inclusive resort right on the beach! An all-inclusive resort is a hotel where all or most of your food and beverages are included with the cost of your hotel stay but it could also include things like activities, entertainment, child care, select spa services and more that are provided by the hotel. Some hotels even allow you to purchase your flight as a part of the hotel booking package which can make planning a trip easier. Our first day in Punta Cana was spent enjoying the pool, food, drinks, and of course the beach. The resort was massive with so much to do and see! They even had a cool ice cream truck that was converted into a restaurant set up right on the beach serving hot dogs, hamburgers, fries, and drinks! That night they had a glowing jelly fish themed party on the beach for the kids that ultimately turned into an adult party as the night went on.

The second day we decided to go to La Hacienda Park, an amusement park in Punta Cana. Now this wasn't your typical rollercoaster filled amusement park. At La Hacienda Park, for 7 hours and \$85, you can go horseback riding through the jungle, dune buggy racing with a pitstop to a river for a quick plunge to cool off, take a ride through the safari, and take a chairlift up to the top of a mountain so that you can zipline



My friends and I on a Banana Boat tour on the beach right outside of the resort

through the jungle and jump off a platform at the end! Not to mention they also picked us up from our resort an hour away and provided a full-blown buffet style Dominican lunch for us free of charge! The food was so good that I went back for seconds... and thirds 😊! After a long day of fun, we paid for our pictures (they took photos of us doing the activities) and hopped on the bus to head back to the resort for our last dinner in Punta Cana before flying home the next day.

Since we had a flight later in the afternoon, we went on a banana boat ride that ended with us being flung into the water (on purpose) right by the shoreline! After drying off, we ended up getting a full body aromatherapy massage on the beach at a spa next door and then snapped a couple of photos with a photographer that was on the beach letting people take pictures with his parrot! Now the part you've all been waiting for! Drum roll please 🎵



The dune buggies we drove through the jungle

Here are a few commonly asked questions about travel post incarceration:

Q: Can I get my passport while on Supervised Release?

A: Yes, just check in with your Probation Officer (PO) prior to applying! Although you may apply for your passport while under Supervised Release, you will not be able to take a trip out of the country until you complete your supervision.

Q: Where do I go to apply for my passport?

A: You can apply for your passport at your local passport agency office or at the USPS post office. If you are renewing your passport, you can apply by mailing in your renewal application. *Keep in mind that you will need to reapply for your passport if you do not renew it within 5 years after the expiration date.

Q: Can I travel within the US while on Supervised Release?

A: Yes! You can ask your PO when it's okay for you to travel. Most PO's like to get to know you a little bit before granting your request to travel. Once you've been given the okay to take a trip, you will need to provide your PO with your travel and lodging information, as well as the name and contact information of the people you are traveling with. Once they have this information, they will need to get your travel requests approved by their supervisor and then provide you with a copy of that approval for your own records. You will need to keep this copy with you in case something happens where you need to prove that you are allowed to be out of state.

Q: What charges can prevent me from getting my passport?

A: Having a felony record does not automatically mean that you can not get a passport. Here a list of reasons you may get denied when applying for your passport:

- Having an international drug trafficking charge
- Outstanding arrest warrants
- \$2,500 or more of unpaid child support or other serious financial obligation like delinquent tax debt
- A court order preventing you from international travel (ie: situations where a judge has restricted travel due to ongoing legal matters.)
- Sex offender status may require additional scrutiny prior to approval

Q: Which countries have strict travel restrictions for people with felony convictions?

A: There are a few countries that have travel restrictions for those with felony records. Here are some that we are aware of from our research. Keep in mind that each country has its own definition of what crimes constitute denial so even if a country is on this list, you may still be able to get in.

- Argentina
- Australia: denies anyone who has been sentenced to a prison term of 12 months or more.
- Canada: denies anyone who has committed a non-summary offence unless they prove to the Canadian Minister of Immigration that they are rehabilitated. An example of non-summary conviction offences include causing a disturbance, trespassing, and petty theft.
- Chile
- Cuba
- India
- Iran
- Israel
- Kenya
- Macau
- New Zealand: denies anyone who, in the past 10 years, was convicted and sentenced to prison for 12 months or more, and permanently denies anyone who has been sentenced to prison for five years or more.
- Panama
- South Africa
- Taiwan
- The United Kingdom

Thank you all for joining me on another adventure Around The World. I hope these travel tips and Q&A help you plan the ultimate vacation when you come home! Write back with any questions you have about traveling post incarceration, and we'll be sure to answer your questions in the next issue! Safe travels!

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,

This question is coming from two members of Free Minds. We are both women who are struggling with breaking unhealthy habits and patterns that have us returning to jail.

DJ: I was recently released. All I'd wanted was to be free and start over with a clean slate. The same day I was released, I was at the bus stop when a man offered me drugs. Even though I'd promised myself I would stay clean. I went with him and now, here I am back behind bars!

LW: What is the first step to staying free, in your opinion?

How can we resist temptation, and break old patterns so that the next time we get out, we can choose a new path and never come back to jail?

Thank you for your advice!

Sincerely,

DJ and LW

Salutations to all our women in confinement and a gracious hello to my FM's fam. The leaders of this Connect advice hope it reaches all genders who in solidarity at the moment may be wrestling with breaking a cycle of harm to oneself. Along with this worldly wisdom, I'll be adding quotes from the book Leaders Eat Last by Simon Sinek, an optimist who believes in a brighter future for humanity.

DJ & LW and Connect, thanks for this opportunity. I praise you all for your resilience and how you've thrived. Please don't get tired or break my mothers, sisters, and daughters. Never lose your empathy for another or especially compassion first for yourself and then others, due to the pressures of life. You've been endowed with these traits of character and they are the things that break negative cycles and unhealthy habits. As Simon Sinek wrote in Leaders Eat Last, "Only when we feel we are in a Circle of Safety will we pull together as a unified team, better able to survive and thrive regardless of the conditions outside." He also wrote, "When the conditions are right, when a strong Circle of Safety is present and felt by all, we do what we do best. We act in the manner for which we are designed. We pull together."

Breaking unhealthy habits boils down to the individual who is sick and tired of landing themselves in undesired

consequences. It doesn't matter who we are, what we've been through, where we come from. When we struggle together or individually we start either a short bid or long bid with our unhealthy habits that affect a community. The blessed part of life is, we always have room for the improvement we desire to right our spirit, mind, and actions. Knowing is half the battle, right! So knowing our impulsive cravings and triggers is a key to success. I struggle with PTSD and anxiety; another person may struggle with loneliness and physical abuse. We have to identify our buttons and activating causes, which is vital to our success. Sinek advises us to focus on tangible goals and write them down. "We seem to trust our eyes more than any of our senses. That's the reason we're often told to write down our goals. 'If you don't write down your goals,' so the saying goes, 'you won't accomplish them.' ...if we find that vision inspiring and worthy of our time and energy, then we can more easily plan the steps we need to take to achieve that vision."

At our lowest is where we want control of our lives. At this moment is where one needs to get real particular about people, places, and things they do in life. A proper structured and written down plan of the type of people, places, and things ensure you have a Circle of Safety.

DJ & LW, today on this journey we have to seek self-taught and professional education, job training, and reentry assistance in and out of prison that better our chances at not coming back. It's going to take a personal effort to dig in deep and figure individually what our needs are. The cornerstones are spiritual, mental, education & job training, finances, and hobbies that are going to keep us busy and out of trouble; these things are going to sustain us and help us progress for the family fabric.

My trusted Circle of Safety advisors have this to add; DJ and LW, you've both already taken the most necessary step to living free and with a clean slate that's "wanting to change." The next step is figuring out how to get to that change and continuing in that best version of you for the duration of your life. My advice to you is to dig deep into your well of discipline. The first step to staying free is networking with people that are accustomed to being free. You can meet and associate yourself with these types through employment, education, church, the gym and a number of other places. We're fortunate to be from a city with plenty of resources for its citizens. Use the resources! We have Narcotics Anonymous

(NA) and plenty of other community support groups all throughout the city. There's a lot of us leaving prison and living life like we never spent a day in jail. That can be you. It's attainable. Just take advantage of the opportunities available. I'm rooting for you. Lastly, don't wait until you get out to choose a new path. Choose it now. Make the decision on how you want to live and pursue your dream life with a renewed energy that can only evolve into reality. - EW

The first step to staying free, and resisting temptations and breaking old patterns to work towards a new path and not return to prison, is to seek a spiritual path. Whatever that spiritual or higher power that suits you. A spiritual path comes with healing and healing starts with your daily choices. Daily you must love and choose yourself first. Your daily choices and decisions should come with the start of your day, where you want to be, and the circle of associates that you choose to be with or give access to your life. If you are aware of your weaknesses, choose the circle of people and places that present healthier and positive energy. Time alone is essential and good for your soul too. All through life there is opportunity for growth. You will meet a new version of yourself at age 20, 30, 40 etc. Each version will show you life as it is. It's all your choice. - MB

I would say: Focus on building the life you want now and don't make choices that could send you back to jail. Be careful who you put yourself around, because getting in the wrong car or the wrong situation can change everything. You're still here, and that means you've got the chance to move forward and tell your story. - AT

Okay! This is my recap on "How to Build Good Habits That Stick." Start with little steps. Stay consistent. Progress towards life's needed attention areas or habits. Doesn't matter what area you're trying to fix, mend, or get ready for upon release, your daily habits are the answer. 1.) Choose a few small habits; the goal is to pick something doable, positive, and meaningful. 2.) Make it a daily routine; focus on consistency rather than perfection. 3.) Write down your progress; journaling your progress is a good addiction that keeps you motivated. 4.) Give yourself credit; recognize your follow-through, pat yourself on the back, and feel you're winning. 5.) Don't let a mistake cause a stoppage. The key isn't perfection; it's consistency over time.

So fam, if I wasn't clear on things, here's what I want you to take away from this: Change isn't a New Year's Resolution that fades over a short period. With breaking unhealthy patterns, it is all about a constant inspection of self and a positive effort on lifestyle change. Find groups that can best support you and help keep you accountable like NA or peer

support groups for example. My Best, TS

A couple Free Minds team members who have been through the reentry process wanted to add their thoughts as well:

I'd like to start by saying that mistakes are just lessons to be learned and not everyone gets it on the first try. Don't be too hard on yourself! I have struggled with addiction and relapse has been a part of my recovery along the way. During my last incarceration due to relapse, I took that time to really assess what it was that I wanted out of my life and all that I had to lose if I continued down that path. I decided that my recovery was more important to me than anything and anyone. When you make the choice to live a life that makes you proud of who you are, your decisions and actions follow course. When I came home, I decided that I would stay away from people, places, and things that no longer served the purpose or road that I was traveling. I am happy to say that I am 3 years clean and sober and this can and will be you too! You got this, just stay focused on the purpose you have for your life! -Regina

I respect your honesty. The first step to staying free is deciding your freedom is worth more than your old habits. Temptation will always come, but that's when you pause and remember what's at stake. Surround yourself with positive people, stay busy doing the right things, and reach out when you feel weak. One good choice at a time can change your whole story. -Craig

Here are some additional resources that may be helpful:
Narcotics Anonymous (NA)
PO Box 9999
Van Nuys, CA 91409 USA
800-926-8143
www.na.org

NAMI DC (they provide support groups for adults with mental illness and their families)
1629 K St NW, Ste 300
Washington, DC 20006-1631
202-466-0972
www.namidc.org

REBUILD (a project providing up to 10 free therapy sessions for formerly incarcerated people)
www.darknessrisingproject.org/help-me-find-a-therapist/

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."

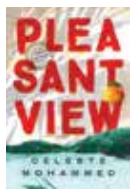
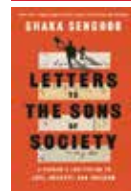
- **Eyone:** Free Minds Reentry Book Club "The Build Up": *Letters to the Sons of Society: A Father's Invitation to Love, Honesty, and Freedom* by Shaka Senghor

Shaka Senghor knows what it is like to raise a child behind bars, with his first son being born shortly after he was incarcerated for second-degree murder. When Senghor came home, he fathered his second son. In this collection of letters written to his two sons, Senghor explores his experiences as a Black man in the United States and unpacks the toxic expectations of masculinity, love, and mental health that are placed on boys from an early age. The book has inspired members in our weekly reentry book club, called "The Build Up," to connect over shared experiences relating to family, substance use, and even the ability to be able to cry.



- **Emily:** *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* by Bianca Marais

This book was actually recommended to me by a Letter Writing Circle volunteer years ago and I finally got a chance to read it last month. The novel is set in Apartheid South Africa (a violent time of segregation and discrimination against Black South Africans that lasted from 1948 until the 1990's) and follows two separate characters -- Robin Conrad, a ten year old white child who has experienced immense tragedy, and Beauty Mbali, a Xhosa (an ethnic group in South Africa) woman who comes to nanny Robin while on a search for her own missing daughter. The book explores racism, unlearning prejudice, and found family. It wasn't my favorite read, but I did enjoy learning more about Apartheid-era South Africa.



- **Julia:** *Enter Ghost* by Isabella Hammad

Enter Ghost is about an actress, Sonia, who grew up in Europe though her family is from Palestine. When she returns to Palestine to visit her sister, she becomes involved in a local production of the play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, to be staged in the West Bank, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (occupied by Israel). As Sonia and the other actors prepare for their play, they must contend with day-to-day challenges like navigating military checkpoints amid increasing paranoia that someone in their troupe may be cooperating with the Israeli authorities. I loved this book and thought it was a beautiful reflection on the role of art in the struggle for liberation.

- **Neely:** *Pleasantview* by Celeste Mohammed

Mohammed's novel is a set of stories, each told from the view of a different character living in a small fictional village in the real Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago. As you jump from character to character, their stories begin to intertwine as Mohammed paints a picture that exposes the pain and hardships of the lives of those who live in what is considered a "tropical paradise" to the outside world. Despite the physical beauty of the islands where these stories take place, the tales in this book are quite dark and center on themes of violence, poverty, and abusive relationships. I was sad to reach the end of the book and realize that not one female character had a happy ending. I think Mohammed did this intentionally, as she wanted to offer a critique of the overlooked realities of places that are often romanticized by tourists. Despite the heavy tone of the book, Mohammed has a clear love for her country and her writing encourages people to appreciate the beauty of tropical islands while not overlooking the humanness of the individuals who live there.

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.

A Poet's Black History by Steven Harrison

Description provided by the author: I wrote this poetry book in the month of February for Black History month. I love to learn about my people, their struggles and what they have been through that made it possible for us to be where we are today. I wanted to do something to be a part of Black History in a positive way. So I had to write this. I know when I die these words will live on. I wrote poetry about my Black history and the Black History of our people. I feel like I did a good job. I certainly did my best, but I'll let you be the judge of my work of art. Enjoy your journey through A Poet's Black History.



CONVERSATION WITH ALLEN

Hello friends, my name is Allen and I am the Director of Finance and Operations here at Free Minds. I am responsible for maintaining the financial integrity of the organization by ensuring the accurate and timely accounting of our finances and investments. My work encompasses all areas of Free Minds - whether it be issuing a weekly stipend to a reentry member's debit card for attending the Build Up, paying our Teaching Artists for facilitating at the Jail Book Club or reconciling the Amazon monthly statement (which we use to order books for our Prison Book Club).

Much of the work I perform at Free Minds is similar to my previous work in the corporate world: creating spreadsheets, performing account reconciliations and investigating budget variances. In this corporate world, the number one goal was making as much profit as possible. With this primary goal, empathy and compassion often was on the short end of the stick. As I mentioned in the Wealth issue of the Connect, working in the corporate world left an empty feeling in me and left me wondering if there was something better in my future. And thanks to Free Minds, an opportunity arose six years ago where I could utilize my professional talents to help people in need and provide hope.

Having financial integrity is just as important at Free Minds but we also have the additional responsibility of practicing empathy and compassion. I have been fortunate to have lived a life where I have not experienced many difficulties. My faith and Free Minds has guided me to be more aware of other people's emotional experiences and feel those same emotions from their perspective. And then the next step is to take action and help the individual in need. Examples of this can be a financial task such as preparing a reentry member's income tax returns or providing a listening ear to an individual's concerns.

I know I am much improved (I guess it comes with being old!) but being more empathetic and compassionate is an ongoing journey. The news headlines show a lack of empathy and compassion, which can be depressing and discouraging. At times, we may want to give up and become apathetic (showing or feeling no interest, enthusiasm, or concern for others). However, it is important to recognize this is not right and that it is incumbent on us to have empathy and compassion as pillars of how we live and conduct ourselves.

Thank you for reading this and I look forward to seeing/hearing from you down the road!

CONNECT ON CORRLINKS *By Aneka*

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

Free Minds Corrlinks Info:

Corrlinks First Name: Free Minds

Corrlinks Last Name: Connect

Corrlinks Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org

Free Minds Getting Out Info:

Getting Out First Name: Connect

Getting Out Last Name: Free Minds

Getting Out Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org

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

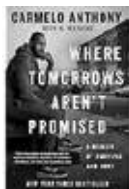
- I am a youth charged as an adult from DC and/or an incarcerated young adult from DC, currently between the ages of 18-24
- I am eligible for D.C.'s Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act or Second Look Amendment Act (also known as IRAA 3.0) which allows D.C residents who were under 25 at the time of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

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



BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club



Where Tomorrow's Aren't Promised: A Memoir of Survival and Hope by Carmelo Anthony *with Neely*



Our latest Books Across the Miles selection is *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 shared your meaningful reflections about this book, here is what some of you had to say!

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?

PF: When you expect something very badly, you have the risk of being highly disappointed if it doesn't happen. I tried to be transferred to Canada to serve my sentence closer to my family. My first request was denied just before Trump's re-election. So, after Trump's inauguration I sent a reconsideration. At the time I write this, I haven't gotten an answer, and I've kind of lost hope about a positive outcome. I recently read a book, *Letting Go*, that says that you should get more things fixed by letting go. I don't know if it works, but it's difficult to let go when something is very important to me.

LW: A dream I always had growing up, and still have, was starting and growing a successful family business. I was afraid at first because I didn't know anything about how to start. I'm not afraid anymore.

JT: Carmelo's perspective about 'dreaming too big' is relatable, especially coming from environments where tomorrow isn't promised. As a black man growing up in certain neighborhoods, you are prone to incarceration or death on a larger scale than most, so keeping your mind small while still trying to grow is a common theme. For me, I always wanted to be a businessman of sorts, with no real idea of how that would look, but I always moved with a sense of death or incarceration on my mind, because it was always around me.

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?

LW: The image that I remember 'Melo explaining about his father is that he was tall with enough bulk to hold his own on the court. Also that he showed compassion and love to the people in his hood. I had an uncle that I only knew through stories. My mom and aunts say they don't know where he went years ago. They haven't seen him since the '70's, but they say me and him look alike. I always wanted to pick his brain on style and things. I wanted to keep up with each other.

JT: My grandfather was the person in my life that I only knew through stories; he battled cancer before he passed away when I was just 6 months old. He had the chance to hold me on his death bed, according to my mother, but I never had the chance to interact with him outside of that. I hear stories of his character through my mother and grandmother, and I believe I would have loved him just as much as the individuals in my family who did get to experience him.

PF: Carmelo has a positive image of his dad: hard worker, generous, always ready to help everyday. He unfortunately died of cancer when Carmelo was two years old. Carmelo received at least three legacies from his father: the same first name, a similar physical appearance, and a small gold chain with a little Jesus piece, which Carmelo lost because he trusted his friends who borrowed it and never gave

it back. I don't know if I ever knew somebody only from other people's stories. In fact it's partially wrong because we all know our parent's childhood stories mainly through grandparents, aunts, and/or uncles. I remember stories about my father's childhood that my grandmother told me when I was on vacation with her.

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?

PF: Carmelo's mother was a hard worker and wanted to be sure her kids never missed something, even education and culture. She worked several jobs to make ends meet and even paid for private school for Carmelo, who was oblivious of this fact himself for a long time. Carmelo's mother exposed her children to museums and wanted to be independent in life because it was the most important value to her. When I was a kid, I was sent every summer to a month-long camp. So I think that it helped to reinforce my independent side (which was always strong anyway).

JT: One of the most important places that I visited as a child was literally the playground. As a child, I wasn't exposed to much outside of school considering that my mother raised me and my brother on her own. She kept a tight leash on us regarding what we could and could not do, but the playground was always a refreshing way to disconnect from the world, even if it was for a few minutes. We hardly traveled as kids, so much of our priority, especially mine, was to do good in school.

LW: For lack of money, she went to work one, two, or three jobs to make up for it. She wanted to go hard for her family. She showed them the parks and fun free or low-cost stuff so they could get out of the house. I think going to Frederick Douglass's house, the Baltimore Aquarium, and the neighborhoods of Chevy Chase and Georgetown made me want more.

4. Explain how Carmelo felt about his name. How do you feel about your own name?

LW: He felt his name was weird or a joke. He didn't see the importance of keeping that name alive at first. When his mom gave him the "words of wisdom," he got the picture. I feel great about my name. I think we looked it up before. It means "known across the land." Ain't that the truth.

JT: My name is something that became a topic of conversation among me and my mother just a few years ago. My mother simply named me after Michael Jordan, considering that the year 2000 was still somewhat the peak

of Michael Jordan's fame and popularity. I haven't always been the biggest fan of my name, but I have grown to accept it more than in years past.

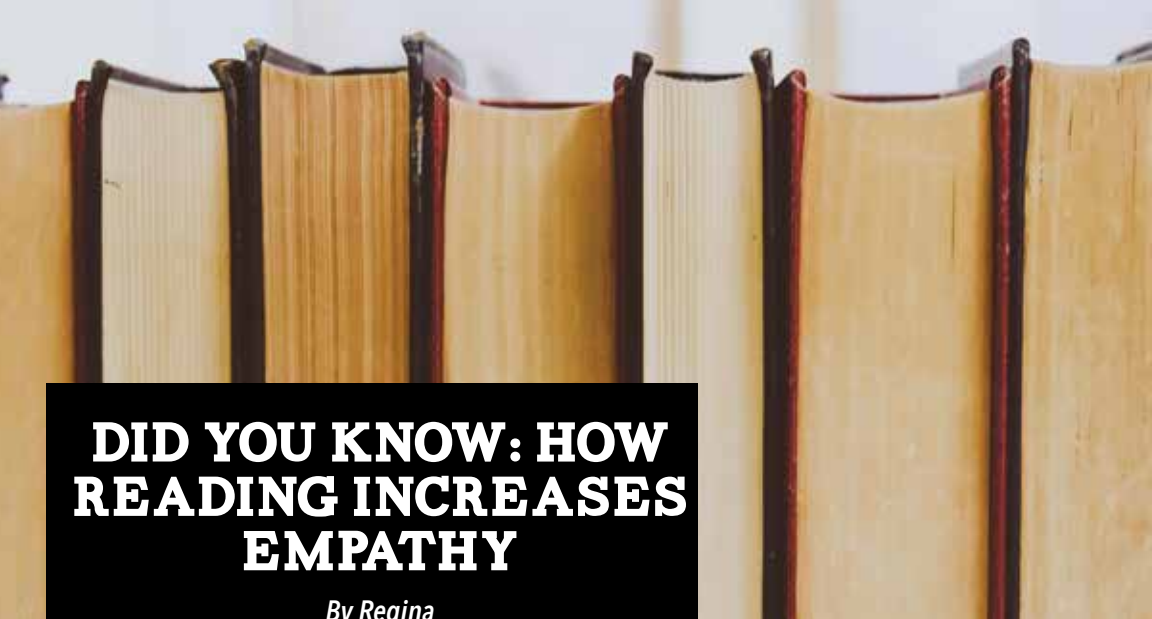
PF: Carmelo didn't really like his name. He felt that his name was too Puerto Rican and not Black enough for Baltimore. I like the story when he pretended to be called Tyrone Johnson at school, especially when his mother discovered that. It was funny. I like my name, but not in prison. In fact, it's like my life in prison is kind of a parallel life, not my real life. That's why I prefer using my nickname in prison. It's like it's not me in prison; I am out of my place.

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?

PF: Everybody suffers in a way. It's difficult to compare pains. What makes one pain greater than another? It's all subjective. There is no small or big pain, just pain. In Black communities especially, pain is part of daily life for generations. It's kind of a generational legacy that comes from slavery and all the subsequent discriminations and prejudices. Also, in the 'hood you cannot show your pain because you have to show you're strong. The result is depression and, too often, violence and substance abuse.

LW: Pain is dealt with like this because a lot of people don't have safe spaces. Or they don't have comfort with anybody to vent to or get sound advice. Keeping everything bottled up is counterproductive to your brain, immune system, and emotions. You might drive yourself crazy.

JT: Pain is so often dealt with in isolation in most impoverished and troubled communities because we grow up with the expectation that "no one is coming to save us." In most instances, a mother or family member would explicitly say this to us, to let us know that we won't get through life unscathed, but to also try to prepare us for what's ahead in terms of life and its obstacles. There is little to no hope in impoverished, crime riddled neighborhoods, and minimal time to heal at best considering that uncertainty scavenges through one's mind daily.



DID YOU KNOW: HOW READING INCREASES EMPATHY

By Regina

Empathy is the ability to connect with others by being aware of, being sensitive to, and understanding and sharing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences (ccira.blog, 2024, as cited in Bazalgette 2017; Henshon, 2019). Reading is one of the most powerful ways to increase empathy. According to fairmontschools.com, through literature readers can explore life through different perspectives by stepping into the shoes of diverse characters allowing for emotional and intellectual growth by connecting with people and places they may never encounter in real life. Studies suggest that when people read about characters going through challenges, their brains can respond in a manner similar to experiencing the events firsthand. This experience helps people to understand emotions and foster a deeper connection to others in their own lives (2025).

PsychSafety.com states that reading fiction as opposed to non-fiction can positively improve our capacity for empathy. The effect is contingent on the reader's "emotional transportation into the narrative." Research shows that the positive effects of reading fiction on empathy can persist in the long term and does not always manifest immediately, but does build over time as people reflect the fictionalized experiences onto the real world and real people (2025).

Literacy and literature hold great power in connecting us as human beings (ccira.blog, 2024, as cited in Mirra, 2018). Readers weave ideas from the text with what they already know to infer about the characters' thoughts, feelings, and motives. This type of inferential thinking supports the ability to engage in perspective taking, a central component of empathy (ccira.blog, 2024, as cited McCreary & Marchant, 2017).

While some people are naturally more empathetic than others, most people become more empathetic with age. There are many ways of cultivating and increasing empathy by way of practicing positive social behaviors such as really getting to know people, putting yourself in their shoes, and challenging one's own biases as it relates to others.

I often find myself absorbed in the emotions and characteristics of a character in a book that I empathize with and find myself transported into that place and time engaged in a shared experience with the character. There are often times I read a book and get to experience an emotion that I couldn't put a name to but after reading I realized that not only have I felt that emotion but I also now understand what it is, and what it feels like, as well as identify and empathize with someone else who may be feeling the same. The concept of using books in this way is a great example of bibliotherapy, which we do here at Free Minds. Bibliotherapy is a form of creative arts therapy that uses literature to help you improve your life by providing information, support, and guidance through reading books and stories.

Reading opens doors to a diverse range of characters and emotions that people deal with everyday. It boosts empathy and gives people a better understanding of not only other people's feelings but also a deeper understanding of one's own feelings helping build connections with individuals, cultures, and communities. By choosing books that offer a variety of voices, emotions, and experiences people can increase their capacity for empathy and compassion and begin to see the beauty in our shared humanity as a whole. (fairmontschools.com, 2025).

DC CULTURE: DC JAZZ FEST

By Sofia

Hey Free Minds fam! It's Sofia here again with another installment of our DC Culture article where we highlight different art, food, music, literature, and other cultural happenings here in the District.

The festival began in 2004 and was originally billed as the Duke Ellington Jazz Festival, to honor the famous jazz musician who hailed from DC. The first installment was located at the historic Lincoln Theater in the heart of the U Street corridor, which was once known as "Black Broadway". U Street's "Black Broadway" history originates from the number of theaters and music venues that once dominated the area and housed famous Black performers including Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Nat King Cole. This history alone serves as the perfect context to celebrate jazz artists local and beyond in our nation's capital.

The DC Jazz fest took place during Labor Day Weekend and had events the whole week celebrating jazz locally, and bringing in artists from all over the world for performances and educational sessions. One of the things that struck me was just how diverse the jazz performances and groups were, ranging from contemporary jazz to jazz infused with latin rhythms or popular songs, and of course classical big band jazz. I attended the first day of the weekend festivities on Saturday, August 30th and heard three phenomenal groups performing at the largest stage on the Wharf, set against the backdrop of the Washington Channel of the Potomac river.

The first group I heard was the legendary Sun Ra Arkestra, which was formed in the mid-1950s and led by keyboardist/composer Sun Ra until his death in 1993. The group and Sun Ra are considered pioneers of afrofuturism, which was explored in our Dreams issue of the Connect. Coined in 2018 by American writer Mark Dery, afrofuturism describes a social, cultural, political, and artistic movement that imagines alternate realities for Black people, encouraging us to redefine our current experiences in hopes of defining our futures. Their music almost feels like a cosmic big band, but has a classic swing sound to it that is colorful. Later in the day, we watched a soulful performance from The Baylor Project, which is co-led by their vocalist, Jean Baylor, and drummer, Marcus Baylor, who are husband and wife. The group has received multiple Grammy nominations and featured bright horns and powerful drumming, which served as the



DC Jazz Fest String Queens

backdrop from Jean Baylor's smooth and soulful vocals. They ended their performance with some jazzy gospel.

The last group that we had the chance to hear was The String Queens, who are actually from and based in Washington, DC. They are the recipients of a DC JazzFest "Jazz Education Award" and are made up of three dynamic women who are also dedicated DC public school teachers. The group has come to make a global name for themselves and has even performed at Carnegie Hall. Their lively performance featured mash-ups of popular songs, classical music, and modern jazz. My personal favorite piece of theirs was a jazzy string rendition of "Human Nature" by SWV, "Golden" by Jill Scott, and "Back in the Day" by Erykah Badu. It was powerful to end the day with a powerful group, based here in the District, who are making an impact in the lives of DC children's educational journeys, and making their mark globally in the jazz scene.

FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP

1816 12th Street NW
Washington, DC 20009

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: PASSION

By Julia

Passion is defined as "an intense desire or enthusiasm for something," for example, an activity or topic. With this next issue, we want to create a space for people to share about their hobbies, their interests, things they love to do, subjects they love to learn about, or new things they want to try. We know the FM family is full of people with diverse interests, including things we might not necessarily know about each other. Like, I love to read and write science fiction, and I'm also a women's soccer – especially Washington Spirit–fanatic!

Those are just two of my passions. Maybe you're passionate about music, or political education, or epic fantasy novels. Are you the best basketball player on the yard, or the resident chess master? Do you run the best Dungeons & Dragons games on the unit? We want to read all about it! Maybe you love learning about specific topics – whether that's crochet, or African American history, or languages of the world...whatever it is that you're passionate or enthusiastic about, tell us all about it!

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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