

# Free minds Connect



## WHAT'S YOUR PASSION?

**A PASSION FOR USING MY VOICE  
FOR OTHERS – DAMON'S STORY**

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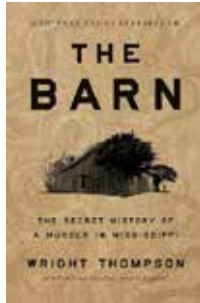
# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Dear Passionate, Creative Free Minds members,

When Aneka asked the team what is one hobby or interest we each had for this issue, I immediately thought my hobby is hearing about and seeing the product of all of your interests and passions! I love when we receive the latest amazing creation of crochet, collage, leather work, artwork, and, of course, writing. You all are creative engines! Okay, I realized that Aneka might not accept that lol, so I thought hard about it and realized I'm a **museophile**! A person who loves going to museums. I could spend hours in them. My favorite are history museums. When I travel, I try to find a local museum to visit; they are often small but absolutely fascinating. I've learned about things I would never have even thought about had I not sought out locations where locals have lovingly preserved history and showcased their proud cultural heritage.

I even have a bucket list of odd museums I want to visit. Here are just a few; send me any museums you know about so I can add to my growing list! **The Museum of Broken Relationships (in Zagreb, Croatia)**, containing objects donated by people from around the world, each representing a failed relationship and the story behind it. **The International Cryptozoology Museum (in Portland, Maine)**, showcasing creatures of folklore and legend such as Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, and the Chupacabra. **The Momofuku Ando Instant Ramen Museum (in Osaka, Japan)**, which is a celebration of instant noodles, including a make-your-own cup noodles workshop. And finally, in Cancun, Mexico, the **Cancun Underwater Museum**, home to sculptures beneath the ocean. But first I'd have to take up a new hobby of scuba diving and that scares me a bit, so I might not make it to that one any time soon! 😊

My absolute favorite history museums are about the civil rights movement in this country. Like all of you, I have a passion for redressing past harms and being part of the FM movement to end systemic racism. Just this past Sunday, I was on a webinar (an online video presentation) where the Emmett Till Interpretive Center in Mississippi announced they have bought, and will preserve, the barn where 14-year-old Emmett Till was beaten, tortured, and lynched. It is absolutely vital for this country to recognize, mark, and preserve spaces like this one in the continuous struggle for true racial equity and justice. The book *The Barn: The Secret History of a Murder in Mississippi* by Wright Thompson documents the incredible civil rights legend Gloria Dickerson's lifelong quest to commemorate Emmett Till and educate young people.



In this issue, you'll get to read about so many Free Minds members' passion for advocacy and creating change. Reentry advocate and Free Minds member Damon shares his advice for those of you wanting to be advocates in the Reentry Profile on page 16: to "cultivate your ideas now" so you can put them into practice when you come home. "If you haven't been preparing before today, it's all right... start preparing now."

In Family Ties on page 6, read about Free Minds member Curtis's passion for being the best dad he can be for his daughter. In the few months since his reentry, Curtis has successfully built a renewed relationship with his teenage daughter, who was born briefly before he was incarcerated. Curtis shares how the carceral system can damage connections with loved ones and family ties, and encourages everyone to "show compassion towards your family... Write a letter; even if they don't write back, they are reading them."

Read about a wonderful friend of Free Minds, our fellow nonprofit Young Playwrights' Theatre, in *Paying It Forward* on page 37. In this youth theater organization that serves Black and brown students and other underserved communities, youth find a platform to discover a passion they might not have realized they had, and, as YPT's artistic director puts it, "an experience where their words are valued and they're nurtured as young artists." Alumni have gone on to teach and counsel youth, proving the multiplying effect of the arts. Finally, we have a special Spinning the Track advice column where our reentry members provide guidance on the importance of setting boundaries with a fellow member's young adult son on page 32. With expectations and communication, conflict can dissipate and greater understanding can bloom.

As FM poet JS describes, passion can be so all encompassing that it can't be contained (from "I Have a Passion" on page 10):

*"My passion is to be so moved that it can't be explained,  
My passion is to be so driven that it felt like an eruption from a volcano  
it can't be contained"*

I hope this issue sparks a new passion – along with passion for Free Minds 😊

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: Animal Kingdom**

*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*

## **Community Members Join Free Minds for an In-Person Write Night**

On a Tuesday evening in early October, community members joined the Free Minds family for an in-person Write Night at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in the Capitol Hill neighborhood in DC. Since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Write Nights have typically been held on Zoom (a virtual video conferencing platform), which enables us to connect with people outside the DC area, as well as with people with immunodeficiencies who might otherwise not be able to gather safely. For our in-person Write Night, participants joined reentry members, known as Poet Ambassadors, at round tables where everyone wrote comments on poems mailed in by incarcerated Free Minds members. The Poet Ambassadors shared their own experiences with participants, and had engaging conversations based on the poems they were all leaving comments on. Poet Ambassadors KB and Saleem shared poetry of their own with the audience as well as uplifting poems written by incarcerated members who were unable to physically join us. The event was a great success with over 80 participants in total including lawmakers from Capitol Hill Congressional staff!

## **Free Minds Reentry Members Graduate from the 10th Peer Support Cohort**

In October, Free Minds proudly celebrated the graduation of the 10th cohort of the Joshua Samuel Memorial Peer Support Training Program. For 12 weeks, 15 Free Minds members in the reentry book club met on Zoom to learn how to provide trauma-informed emotional support to others returning home from incarceration. The graduates were celebrated by one another, other Free Minds reentry members, Free Minds staff, volunteers, and supporters, in a special Zoom graduation ceremony. One of the speakers for this cohort, Albert, shared this powerful reflection: *"That feeling of knowing when I communicate...when I share my feelings, my thoughts, no matter how deep I go inside of myself, I don't have to question if someone understands me...The things we accomplished, we accomplished together."*

## **Free Minds Travels to Nebraska for Emerging Adult Conference**

Free Minds co-founder and Executive Director Tara was joined by Free Minds Program Assistant Jordan and Poet Ambassador Rob for the two-day long Annie E. Casey Foundation Emerging Adult Gathering in Omaha, Nebraska. The gathering brought together nonprofit organizations from across the country and stakeholders who work with emerging adults (ages 18-25) involved in the criminal legal system, sharing insights and knowledge with each other. Tara and Free Minds members Rob and Jordan shared a presentation highlighting Free Minds' advocacy work with Thrive Under 25, a DC coalition comprised of DC based nonprofits, attorneys and directly impacted community members advocating for anyone who entered the adult criminal legal system under the age of 25. Jordan was also a featured speaker on a panel of fellow young adults sharing their insights to judges, probation officers, and community groups from different parts of Nebraska on how to best support emerging adult youth. Rob shared about his organization, More Than Our Crimes, and a documentary they produced profiling Second Look law recipients.

## **In Loving Memory**

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

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### *Rest in Power:*

Glen, James, Cortez, Derrick, Christian, JohnQuan, Nadar, Andre, Darond, Dontel, Tyree, Antwone, Amari, Kuron, Dwayne, Darnell, Marcus, Wayne, Eric, Sharod, Arthur, Isaiah, DeMario, Mshairi, Tahlil, Donta, Joshua, John, Delonte 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

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



## FREE MINDS MAILBAG

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

**JS:** This space you all give, not just for me, but also other people who are incarcerated or even at home is something that can't be thanked enough – from me alone, if no one else feels the same. ...I believe the energy of compassion stemming from the effects of empathy has caused me to be grateful in spite and despite of all that could go wrong and all the things that I've personally been through.

**AJ:** I really enjoy sharing my creative works. I was an angry individual in my past. But now I direct my anger to creativity and I'm enjoying it! So thank you for giving me a platform.

**MD:** You guys have been such a blessing to me! You find me wherever I'm at, and your letters come right on time! I'll be stress and in SHU or just going through something and your letters, books, the *Connect* magazine helps me through it, so thank you again!

**SK:** Carmelo Anthony's new book inspired me to be better, do better & help others.

**CH:** Thank you so much for your warm thoughts and continuous support that has been genuine through and through. All of you are so amazing! Know that your works are not in vain, but rather appreciated and valued.

**RB:** Along this journey, I have my Free Minds family to thank for being that constant presence that always shows up in the form of a pleasant surprise. Whether it be through the many books geared towards my interest or even the ones that you've introduced me to which have opened my mind to various other genres. And I can't get enough of the Free Minds *Connect* issues. Every single issue has something for each of us to hold onto. Especially the DC Photos and the Reentry Corner with Ms. Keela.

## QUOTE-I-VATOR

*"Passion is energy. Feel the power that comes from focusing on what excites you."* – Oprah Winfrey, American host and television producer



Oprah Winfrey

*"Love what you do and do what you love. Passion is the key that opens the door to joy and abundance."* – David Cuschieri, author

*"To succeed you have to believe in something with such passion that it becomes a reality."* – Anita Roddick, British businesswoman, best known as the founder of The Body Shop, a cosmetics company producing and retailing natural beauty products which shaped ethical consumerism

*"There is no passion to be found playing small, in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living."* – Nelson Mandela, Activist and former President of South Africa

*"Being passionate about something is the most beautiful characteristic you can develop."* – Charlotte Eriksson, Swedish author

*"You can do anything as long as you have the passion, the drive, the focus, and the support."* – Sabrina Bryan, American singer and actress, best known as a member of the Disney Channel girl group the Cheetah Girls

*"Find your passion, set a goal, go to work, evaluate, reassess, and repeat."* – Elana Myers, American Olympic bobsledder and World Champion

*"Follow your passion. The rest will attend to itself. If I can do it, anybody can do it. It's possible. And it's your turn. So go for it. It's never too late to become what you always wanted to be in the first place."* – J. Michael Straczynski, American filmmaker

# FAMILY TIES: STAYING CONNECTED THROUGH THE TEST OF TIME – CURTIS'S STORY

*By Isaiah*

*For this issue's Family Ties article, I had the chance to interview our Free Minds member, Curtis. He's been enjoying spending time with his family ever since he came home on August 21st. This article follows Curtis 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?

**Curtis:** I came home on August 21st, so a little over two months. I got my job three weeks ago. I got my license. I'm working on getting a car. I'm still building a relationship with my daughter. It was different from when I was in prison; it was a little easier. The challenge came when I got out here.

**Isaiah:** Congratulations on coming home, getting your license, and starting a new job. Where are you working at and what are you doing?

**Curtis:** I've been working at the Washington Convention Center. I set up for events, and clean up too. I do trash detail and I'm a bar porter. I greet people, and then if the bartender runs out of certain liquors or beverages that they need, I go back to the storage room and bring whatever they need back to the bar.

**Isaiah:** How long were you incarcerated?

**Curtis:** I was incarcerated for 18 years and three months. It was a long journey.

**Isaiah:** Can you tell me about your family?

**Curtis:** I lost my mother when I was two. So, I grew up with my grandmother and she was a great lady. My older sister and I have always been together. My dad was in prison. He came home when I was 17, but we had roughly a year together because I went to jail when I was 18. My brother was always around. This was my main family right there. During my incarceration, I lost my father, brother, and grandmother. The closest person to me was my sister. I had my daughter, too. She's been there for me the whole time. She's 19 now. My family consists of me, my sister, my daughter, and my daughter's grandmother, because she's always been like a second mother to me. I'm just meeting my aunts and uncles now, so I'm building a relationship with them.

**Isaiah:** Can you talk about how you tried to keep in touch with your family members while you were incarcerated?

**Curtis:** When I was still in the city at the DC jail, it was easier for my family. Being so young, I didn't know the strain that I was already putting on them because I came to jail with no money. I needed to buy commissary and I needed money for

the phone, but they were willing to do those things when I was local. I used to get flooded with mail. I would call home, and my sister would tell me, "This person asked about you, that person asked about you. This person gave you some money, that person gave you some money." As the years went on, especially when I got transferred into the federal system, that's when the connection was hard.

My way of staying in connection with them was through my sister. She'd pick up the phone as much as she could. I would go through her to reach out to people, even when they didn't reach back. As my daughter got older, we built a bond that was unbreakable. She used to keep me updated on everything. Then, the blessing of being a member of Free Minds. When nobody else would write me, I would get something from them. Like the joy you feel when you get a surprise birthday party. Oh, that would boost your spirits to the moon! It kept me passionate about my writing, reading, and doing better because I knew somebody cared about me outside of the people that I did still have that was family. That was my way of connecting; I made sure to call, I still wrote to my family even when everybody else stopped writing, and I learned how to use email, which was helpful.

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

**Curtis:** My advice for any person who's still incarcerated and wants to keep those family ties straight, it'll be the same thing this *Connect* is dealing with. Just like you are passionate about working out or playing basketball, be passionate and show compassion towards your family through those phone calls. Write a letter; even if they don't write back, they are reading them. I found that out once I came home. Every letter I sent home, they opened it, read it, and left it on the table. I got so much feedback on all that when I came home, so it's all on the individual. You have to want it. Because when we think about our family, we think, "Oh, they're out here doing good, I'm incarcerated, they know what I'm going through," but we don't think about what our family is going through. Your family can be incarcerated in debt, they can be incarcerated at work, or mentally incarcerated. So, incarceration runs deep. It doesn't just mean prison. Financial debt is real, and mental debt is real because sometimes people don't know what to do because they've got so deep into debt. Everybody's thinking about, "I need money!" We do receive financial support from our family, and we're taking so much from them, which is putting them in a deeper hole. So just asking them, "How are you doing? Man, is there anything I can do to help?" Maybe not with money, but talking to them. Letting them know, "I'm on a better path in here." Once they know you're doing better, it makes them feel better. It lightens their load. That's my advice to anybody: be real with your family, ask how

they're doing, communicate well with them, and make sure you listen to them. Don't put too many of your problems on them. Let them lean on you from the outside to the inside.

**Isaiah:** That's deep right there! This question is more for family and friends on the outside. How can they support their loved ones that's on the inside?

**Curtis:** I think the support from the outside is hard too. I thought it was easy, but you have so many ways out here to connect with your family. An email a day and a couple of pictures once a month. You've got plenty of apps to send pictures to prison. Communicating with their closest person or communicating with their kids. Even if it's not directly towards whoever your family member is that's incarcerated, but going through somebody that you know that they deal with on a daily basis. Just knowing that somebody asked about them will prompt them to call you and check up on you.

**Isaiah:** What did you do with your family when you came home?

**Curtis:** When I first came home, it was overwhelming. It was so many people. I wanted to ride in the car. I just wanted to feel the seats of a car, so we rode around one day. We went out to eat. Just recently, we went to a haunted house with my nieces, nephews, and little cousins. We've gone go-kart riding and swimming. We even had a balloon party, and everybody bought balloons for me that had little personal writings on them, telling me, "Welcome Home," "Stay Free," "Be Positive."

Everybody was motivating me to take my time. When I first came home, I was rushing. I was like, "Dang, he's driving." "She got her own place." "She got a lot of money." I wanted all those things, but when I went back and looked at the balloons that I did keep, it stated, "Stay Positive." "Be Patient." "Take Your Time." "Stay Free." I didn't know what those words really meant until I started slowing down. I thought, "What caused them to put these words?" Because they understood my old life was going to catch up with me if I didn't do something different. Everything they did for me is memorable now. In this short amount of time, for one, it makes me feel awesome that I had that support.

**Isaiah:** Those messages on the balloons reminded you to stay grounded, and in time, you will have it! You mentioned your nieces, nephews, and your daughter. So, it leads to my next question: What does your family consist of now?

**Curtis:** I understand family is kind of like a community. So, I have my Free Minds family, which I have a lot of good brothers and sisters, as far as the staff and the members that I'm connected with. That's been the biggest help because everybody on this side of my family knows about reentry, but my blood family doesn't really know about the process of reentry. They don't know what we go through mentally. They don't know how to deal with us when we go through those hardships. I would say something like, "Man, I'm going through it," and someone would reply, "You aren't the only one," instead of listening to me. They didn't know how to

help fix the problem that I had. Once I started explaining, they would understand. My family consists of my blood sister and 3 other little sisters who are not related by blood and my 12 nieces and nephews. My daughter is 19. So all her cousins are 18, 19, and 20. I remember being young, and talking to people made me feel that they didn't understand me. So, when I'm around all of them, that's when I really feel passionate. I also have a new woman with whom I'm building a family now. We don't have any kids together or anything, but we live together. It was a little rocky at first, dealing with a man coming home after being away for almost two decades. It was, "Okay, what am I supposed to do?" "How do I do this?" She's teaching me how to cook. She wanted me to make some of the stuff I made in prison. That was her way of getting on my level, and I didn't understand it because she's showing me how to cook on the stove, and I'm showing her how we did it in the bag and hot water. She's like, "You see, we just bonded, right? We have to find more stuff we have in common. You like to eat, I like to cook. Let's do it." She likes to take me to safe places. We went bowling. I don't want to do the club thing. We went to a nice little lounge. She went and took me to get my feet done. So I look at her as family now.

**Isaiah:** Do you have any more advice for Free Minds members who are on the inside?

**Curtis:** For all the ones who're doing time right now. You may not see it, but it's going to get better. Stay resilient, be diligent, and try something new. I'm a living testimony. I didn't think I was going to be here, and it happened. Those five P's. Proper Preparation Prevents Poor Performance. I used to say them all the time, and I thought I did it, but I actually didn't. Prepare yourself for society. Prepare yourself for your first 30 days out on what you're going to do. Prepare yourself while you're in prison to get ready for when you get out, mentally and spiritually. But the biggest thing you have to do is be patient. In there, coming home, and once you get situated, because time is not going to be on your side once you get out here. All the time in the world you have in there is the best time you can use. Educate yourself. Learn about the DMV and the new rules at the DMV. Learn about the process of getting the ID, your social security card, and your birth certificate. Be patient with your family. Give them grace, and also make sure you show them a lot of gratitude, because we don't know everything that they go through while we're incarcerated, which is a lot.

**Isaiah:** That's some good nuggets, right there!

**Curtis:** Last thing, when you do get released, give yourself that time and space to just enjoy being free. Don't rush into trying to get in all the nice clothes and talk to all the women. Take care of yourself first. Be passionate about that, because if you don't take care of yourself, it's a system that's set up that'll help you fail. Your resources, they're out here. All the reentry resources you need are out here. Don't try to do it alone, because that's when you find yourself in a dark place. Call for help when you need it.

**Isaiah:** Thank you so much, Curtis, for doing this interview!



# MEMBERS *CONNECT*: PASSION

## Passions By ROB

What does it mean to be passionate about something? Have you ever felt something in your core that you felt as though you just had to do or loved to do? What is something that compels you to work hard to achieve it, or is something that you would die for? These are all of the things I think about when I think about passions or being passionate about something. Furthermore, I feel as though that a person who isn't passionate about something is not only not living; but is not fit to live. So, what am I passionate about...?

As I think about this question, what immediately comes to mind is all of the things that I love and that I spend a lot of time doing. For instance, I love sports and I have a real passion for basketball. Like, I am an avid hooper and I follow sports passionately. I love my mother and the relationship we share, and I am passionate about making sure I love on her daily. I am passionate about writing. It is my great escape and one of the tools that I use to do my advocacy work. But, what I am most passionate about...what gives me life...what compels me to get up every day and do this work is my deep understanding of how counterproductive incarceration is to rehabilitation and trying to change the criminal justice system, so that everyone is able to get a second chance.

I have many comrades still in prison, who I know could be out here doing amazing things and contributing to society in meaningful ways if only they were given a chance. And I know that most people don't come into contact with these types of people or issues daily (second chances/incarceration/criminal justice), so I feel as though it's my duty, my responsibility to be that one who speaks where they can't speak. To advocate where they can't for themselves. And ultimately to be the voice of the voiceless in our quest to humanize guys like myself who are recently released or those still incarcerated to show that we are all More Than Our Crimes and deserve second chances; especially in this day and time.

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## If I Could Have It My Way By AC

If I could have things my way, I would conquer the world. Well, not in the sense most people would associate with "conquering the world", but I would.

I would start by creating a law firm of dedicated, passionate, world-changing individuals that live by their belief and faith in a better world. We would recruit college students and any person who would react to the question "Does your current job make you happy? Does it fulfill your desire and your call to a greater cause?" We would amass the numbers and turn into a movement, into a power.

The movement would mostly focus on legal representation and overall advocacy for criminal justice; for prison civil rights advocacy; for society's basic human needs such as housing and nutrition; and overall dogwatch government overview so that the government can be held accountable.

I would make sure that our mission specifies that we do what we do because of our love for humanity, love for our fellow men. With this mission in mind, we would highlight hope and faith; we would focus on the perfection of our humanity and thus God's creation. In our network we would have psychologists, sociologists, social workers, counselors, and anything else to better assist those who come through our doors. I would speak to synagogues, mosques, churches, etc., to make sure we, and our chapters are endorsed and tested by local communities. I want our local children to hear the mission and message, and be awed and inspired by our honest desire to simply do right by our fellow men – I want them to dream of joining our ranks to create a better world.

In an ever expanding network of Kindness Warriors (trademark pending lol) we would include hospitals, doctors of any sort, trade work at discounted prices that are given to our groups' members and billed to ur organization, grants for our own researchers and our own scientists that could help us also take care of our mother nature, and this beautiful planet we call our own.

Name? I don't know, something all-inclusive, something universal, and something straight to the point: Towards a Better Tomorrow, Global Network. TBT for short.

Oh man, wouldn't that be nice?



# DC CULTURE: AUTUMN WEEKENDS SPENT AT DC MARKETS

By Sofia

Hey Free Minds fam! For this issue of the *Connect* I'm going to be walking you through one of my favorite ways to spend a weekend in DC, which is at a farmers' or flea market. In case you didn't know, farmers' markets are dedicated to selling fresh produce, meats, dairy, and other food-related items directly to consumers and flea markets are more about buying and selling used or second-hand goods, including vintage (described as anything that is at least 20 years old but less than 100 years old) items, antiques, and collectibles. Luckily there are so many across the city and today I'll be taking you with me to the three I frequent most: the Petworth and Dupont farmers' markets, and Eastern Market.

Farmers' and flea markets exist in many neighborhoods in DC and in each ward. The markets are a great way to uplift local businesses and to buy fresh produce that's locally grown and in season. I also learn so much about farming and food production just by passing through the produce stands at each market and seeing which foods are most abundant during each season. The farmers' markets around the city also typically accept SNAP and WIC benefits, allowing anyone regardless of economic circumstances to purchase fresh produce.

On a warm Saturday in mid-September, I checked out the Petworth farmers' market with a friend who lives in that neighborhood and another friend who was visiting us from out of town. I was on one singular mission when I had decided to check out that particular market: securing one of the best popsicles in DC from a Mexican Paeteria (a stand or store that sells Mexican-style popsicles) called Jarabe Gourmet Pops. The refreshing popsicles often reflect what's in season and I snagged an ice-cold berry lemonade flavor. The Petworths farmers' market is similar to many of the smaller neighborhood farmers' markets around the city, spanning about a block. This market has a social media page that highlights which farms and businesses will be at their market each Saturday, which is how I knew to find Jarabe Gourmet Pops there that particular weekend. Most of the stands belonged to local food and restaurant businesses, with several coffee stands, a taco and burrito stand, and a stand with baked goods. A couple of stands also showed off local business owners selling homemade goods like fragrant body butters and cozy candles.

After securing my popsicle and taking a look at some of the stands, my friends and I hopped on the metro to head to Eastern Market, which is my personal favorite in the city. Eastern Market has been a DC staple for many years, having recently celebrated its 152nd anniversary! The market has been an iconic DC landmark, known for its delicious food selection in the indoor part of the market, and the small businesses it promotes in the outdoor portion which is open on the weekends. Eastern Market spans about two blocks and two side streets, and has an indoor space that is open throughout the week. As my friends and I got off the metro, we crossed the street greeted by lovely jazz music and families and community members of all ages and backgrounds strolling through the market.

There's something for everyone at Eastern Market, with stands selling jewelry, art, leather goods, coats, vintage clothes, incense and fragrances, candles, and other niche artisan goods. One of the things I love most about Eastern Market is how much they promote small local businesses and many of the businesses are family owned, with multiple family members selling at the market together. For

example, there's a vintage clothing stand managed by a mother-daughter duo. I always buy something from their stand and they have even come to recognize me, and there's many interactions like this at Eastern Market since many of the stands are regularly at the market and get to know the community. Behind the indoor part of the market is a space where small stands sell a variety of food. I usually opt for a West African stand that sells different meat kabob sandwiches and salads, aptly named Spicy Water. There are other stands that sell Egyptian food, Thai food, pierogies, tacos and burritos, soul food, and more. After my clothes were purchased, for this visit, I enjoyed a savory and spicy beef kabob sandwich from Spicy Water and washed it down with a fresh mango dragonfruit lemonade from a stand that makes flavored lemonades using fresh fruit along with pit beef and turkey sandwiches. I was so stuffed. My friends and I caught the bus and headed home.

Recently, I decided to check out the Dupont Farmers' Market, near Dupont Circle. Since it's deeper into fall, I was eager to see a variety of squash and apples, and the Dupont market did not disappoint. The Dupont Farmers' market is one of the larger ones in the city and spans several blocks near the Dupont Circle metro entrances. Most of the stands sell produce and other food, such as baked goods and bread. As I strolled through the crowded market, leaves crunching under my feet, the red and yellow hues of the apples and bright orange pumpkins created the picture-perfect autumn scene. Several of the produce stands had little plates piled high with apple slices for each type of apple they were selling along with little toothpicks so that passerbys could have samples, and trust me I sampled those apples! My personal favorites were the Asian pears and pink ladies. The Asian pears were refreshing and subtle while the pink ladies were juicy and tart.

Although winter in DC is fast approaching and the days of strolling at the outdoor farmers' and flea markets may be behind me soon, I hope you enjoyed reading about some of my final visits of the year to a couple of my favorite places to enjoy a lovely weekend in DC. What are some other aspects of DC culture that you'd like to read about in future issues of the *Connect*? Are there any DC literature, events, music, food, arts, etc., that you would like to see highlighted? Write in and let us know, we'd love to hear from you!



The Downtown DC Holiday Market at Penn Quarter currently happening from November 21-December 23 on F & 8th St, NW

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Passion

by CMK

Passion rhymes with fashion  
won't hurt to show a lil compassion  
I want to help my youngin's stop crashing  
I'm a leader, not a follower  
the world needs more passion  
release your pain through your pen  
your words are powerful  
nothing can stop me from  
completing my new life goals  
on my road, imma win gold  
passion helps me to be very bold

## My Passion

By FM

Since I was young, I liked to have fun.  
I have always loved my family.  
I have always wanted to be rich.  
The last time I tried something new was a couple months ago.  
It made me feel like I was becoming different.

In my free time, I like to read.  
I like to read about life.  
I like to talk about life with my friends, peers, and family.  
Right now, I have the time to get myself together.  
Right now, I have the space to learn.

If I had all the time in the world, I would become a better person.  
If I had all the money in the world, I would feed everyone.  
If I had all the space in the world, I would share it.  
If I could try out any new hobby, I would learn politics.  
I think it would make me feel better.  
I can start doing these activities now by learning.

## I Have a Passion

By JS

I have a passion,  
coded like a software program,  
hidden and complicated but still there,  
I get nonchalant like it doesn't exist,  
but once again it's still there.

I move around like I don't care,  
I blow it out of my mouth into thin air,  
I know what stops me from pursuing it,  
It's fear.  
It won't be what I thought it was when I get it,  
I drink it away in a bottle now I'm dizzy,  
it's still snuggled against my heart and occupies space in my mind  
like jeans that's skinny,  
the only difference is I wear it on the inside and jeans are worn on  
the out,

I rely on my intellect  
that's my out.  
My passion is to be so moved that it can't be explained,  
My passion is to be so driven that it felt like an eruption from a volcano  
it can't be contained,  
My passion is to have a passion.

## Passions

By RA

Since I was young, I liked to play football.  
I have always loved boxing.  
I have always wanted to be a good cook.  
The last time I tried something new was ceramics.  
It made me feel like I can just be me and do something I do not know.

In my free time, I like to read, workout.  
I like to read about cars, housing, stocks, and food.  
I like to talk about life and positive vibes with my friends, peers,  
and family.  
Right now, I have the time to reflect on my future goals.  
Right now, I have the space to get things in order for me to come home.

If I had all the time in the world, I would cook and shop.  
If I had all the money in the world, I would buy property, cars done  
up, and give to a cause.  
If I had all the space in the world, I would travel.  
If I could try out a new hobby, I would try fixing up cars and interior design.  
I think it would make me feel accomplished and appreciated for my efforts.  
I can start doing these activities now by reading books and speaking  
with people who have done it and still do it.

## Passion

By DP

Since I was young, I liked to play sports.  
I have always loved to be a positive role model.  
I have always wanted to be a professional boxer.  
The last time I tried something new was when I played pickle ball in 2024.  
It made me feel like I should have been a tennis player.

In my free time, I like to read or work out.  
I like to read about problem solving, thinking, and psychology.  
I like to talk about life and the importance of family with my friends,  
peers, and family.  
Right now, I have the time to educate myself.  
Right now, I have the space to work out.

If I had all the time in the world, I would spend time with my family.  
If I had all the money in the world, I would make everybody rich so  
everyone can be equal.  
If I had all the space in the world, I would be cool and educated.  
I think it would make me feel good to be a personal trainer.  
I can start doing these activities now by being self-sufficient.

## Passion

AB

Over the last  
12 years,  
I have studied the  
in's and out's  
of photography.

Even in the time  
that I've been down,  
I have still studied.

I will apply this  
to my business.

If I keep wanting  
to learn,  
I can bring others  
along for the ride.

And thus,  
generate content.

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## My Passions

By OG

Since I was young, I liked to get money.

I have always loved drawing, money, and designer clothes.

I have always wanted to travel, meet new people, and do something important.

The last time I tried something new was showing restraint, not giving into desire.

It made me feel powerful.

In my free time, I like to read, watch movies, and exercise.

I like to read about psychology.

I like to talk about plans for the future with my friends, peers, and family.

Right now, I have the time to gain knowledge, get healthy.

Right now, I have the space to exercise, open my mind.

If I had all the time in the world, I would pray a lot and help people.

If I had all the money in the world, I would give most of it away.

If I had all the space in the world, I would give most of it away.

If I could try out a new hobby, I would try them all.

I think it would make me feel fulfilled.

I can start doing these activities now by giving this life 110% always.

## Self Discovery

by AC

Since I was young, I liked to discover how the world around me worked

I have always loved to tinker with things

I have always wanted to travel the world to see its beauty

The last time I tried something new was yesterday

It made me feel like I'm still growing as a human being.

In my free time, I like to read and write to process my thoughts

I like to read about travel or a world distant from my every day

I like to talk about life and philosophy with friends, peers, and family.

Right now, I have the time to learn, grow, and live

Right now, I have the space to figure out exactly what's ahead

If I had all the time in the world, I would meet everyone in depth and travel everywhere to learn its history

If I had all the money in the world, I would definitely travel all over the world creating schools and hospitals all over the world along with affordable housing

and electricity and plumbing to reach and help everyone.

Everyone around the world would have, even if minimally, access to schools, hospitals, and all basic needs that are considered "exclusive" for "first world" countries.

If I had all the space in the world, I would build a utopia.

If I could try any new hobby, I would try sky-diving.

I think it would make me feel like fainting but awesome.

I can start doing these activities and hobbies by dreaming, hoping and wishing.

## My Life Business Plan

By LW

The problem is I have been incarcerated,

I need to get a steady and good income

But I also need to get my certifications (NFPA / ISSA).

I want to take all my athletic cousins along

But I don't know if they will see my vision.

I dream about really having a redemption story,

I will find a solution; I will find a job by coming in contact with the right people.

I will make friends who will see my vision, are wealthier than me, are smarter than me.

I will try things like seminars, audiobooks, and going to different gyms.

I will find support from Free Minds Book Club and family and friends.

I will find a solution; I will overcome obstacles because I am built Ford Tough

I will feel confident in myself because God got me.

I will be better than ever because I strive to be every day.

I will find peace because that's what is all boils down to

I will find the solution.

## To Writing, With Love

By ND

I'm not really personal, but I'm personal with you

No, it's not because I've known you for a while, it's just something about you.

It's like attempting to explain the depths of love and you can't.

You simply have to experience it firsthand

I say that because with you, every interaction feels like communion, a confession of aspirations, inspirations, and transgressions.

No, I'm not getting biblical, but maybe a little spiritual because you cruise through me

Like the smoke of a Montecristo Petit Edmundo,

inhale, exhale

like one of Kelli's meditations.

Your entire vibe is captivating like the beat of my favorite groove

I follow your moves - the contours and cursives -

complementing your emotions and moods that produce power and purpose that have the ability to fill any space - human and place

Even when you're casual,

you exude a confidence that captures my imagination and paints pictures of possibility

You're my refuge, too, my honeycomb hideout.

When I'm weighed down by burdens and hardships, trials and tragedy, you make yourself available to me,

allowing me to make my soul cry

While teaching me to restrain my inner G by redirecting my inner G/energy

You help me to breathe

As I hold you close,

you guide me to my centerpiece,

recalibrating my psyche, my emotions, and ultimately me

and you do it all without judgment

Quietly and intimately

Leaving the essence of life on my fingertips

With every stroke,

you become my salvation, my redemption, my hopes and dreams

My legacy

Listen, although we may not connect daily,

I'm grateful that I always have access to you

From heartache to healing, you've taught me that you're always with me

I simply need to pick up a pen to meet you...

To writing,

with Love.

# REAL WORLD OF WORK: WMATA'S "BETTER BUS" OVERHAUL GETS EVEN BETTER WITH ASHLEY COMING ABOARD

*Interview by Jennifer*

I caught up with Ashley, who came home 2 years ago through his IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act) petition, by phone on his rare day off to talk about his passion for helping young people in DC through personal and professional paths.

The Better Bus program launched in June 2025 to simplify the bus routes in the DC area and make them safer. As such, over 500 stops were eliminated and EVERY line was renamed.

- "A" for Arlington/Alexandria
- "D" (downtown) or "C" (crosstown) for DC
- "F" for Fairfax City, Fairfax County, and Falls Church
- "M" for Montgomery County
- "P" for Prince George's County
- Names for express or limited-stop routes will end with an "X."

**What is your current position?:** Metro Bus Operator

**So is driving buses your passion?** No, but I'd been thinking a lot about ways to create positive opportunities for youth and I decided to get my CDL to be able to drive busloads of kids out of DC to broaden their view of the world – and of course, to have fun, too!

**How did you decide on bus trips as the best way to give back to your community?** I have such great memories of the trips my aunt used to organize for my cousins and me to go to places like Hershey Park. While I can still remember all the fun we had on the rides and exhibits – and how everything smelled like chocolate – I also recall looking out the bus window on the way up and back noticing how parts of the country can look very different from DC. For example I saw how people live in isolated rural communities with no public transportation as well as in suburbs with so many malls and big houses.

Trips like those for young kids leave a real impression. I am worried that kids these days are not leaving the city – maybe even their block – so I wanted to give them the kind of experiences I enjoyed as a child on my bus trips out of DC. THAT is my passion.

**Did you go straight to WMATA when you came home?**

No, when I first came home I used all the resources available to returning citizens, including Free Minds, Voices for a Second Chance, MORCA, Department of Employment Services, the READY Center, etc. It was an adventure going all over the city by bus and train and seeing how it had changed in the 21 years since I've been gone.

I'm always looking for the next opportunity. Initially I was accepted into a paid training program to become an automechanic. Although I graduated, I didn't pursue a career in

that field because I quickly learned that trade is not my passion. Since I'm a people person, I decided to look for customer service jobs, which landed me a position in the hot foods department at a Royal Farms, which I immediately started calling "the chicken coop" since I fried a LOT of chicken there!

When I eventually got my driver's license – I say eventually since I failed the first Learner's Permit test because I didn't know what the "Dutch Reach" was – I accepted a contract job cleaning Metro buses from 8pm - 1am in Rockville, MD. I needed my license and a car to drive to that job.

At that time, I was living in a transitional home that had a landscaping company, which also hired me. That's how I was working days cleaning up the sidewalks on Wisconsin Avenue around Tenleytown as well as taking a 5-month IT class at United Planning Organization from 6-9pm. It was a lot of work and studying, but I listened to recorded IT lessons on my earbuds while I emptied the trash. There are two major reasons I got those IT credentials:

1. So I can earn significant money working in IT to fund the bus for the kids I plan to buy, and
2. So I can train the kids in IT. With those skills, they can make good money in Troubleshooting and Cyber Security for themselves. Since not everybody is going to play for the NBA, why not get a skill you can do for 50 years?

I'm always thinking about the kids.

**Do you have advice for members coming home?**

Yes. If you have good attorneys, stay in close contact with them because they can still be supportive out here and they feel good knowing what you're doing with your freedom. I even got to speak to the AU Law School class one of my lawyers teaches!

Also, I encourage members to recognize they are not going to start off making \$50/hour so they shouldn't turn down their noses on jobs, just take a minimum wage job to generate income. However, don't get complacent and stick with that \$18/hour job. Keep earning while you sharpen your skills and look for new opportunities.

**Speaking of opportunities, how did you get into that bus operator's seat?**

I studied on my own for the CDL permit test. This test I passed on my FIRST try! Then I applied for the Metro training program which includes both classroom learning in Landover, MD, then behind the wheel training in Shepherd Park. I think it's one of the best opportunities out here because besides driving, there are many other WMATA positions like maintenance, escalator/elevator repair, etc.

Here are some rapid fire questions:

1. **Can you describe a typical day on the bus?**  
It's adventurous! There is never a dull moment unless you're on the bus by yourself and even then it's still an adventure to ride around the city.
2. **How long is a shift?**  
8-12 hours
3. **What's your favorite aspect of this job?**  
The people – especially the children who just love the bus and bring a special energy. Some of the adults talk to me and others talk loud enough for me to eavesdrop.
4. **What's your least favorite aspect of this job?**  
Hmm, that's hard to say because I like so much about it. But if I had to choose, I'd say traffic is the worst part.
5. **Does it change the way you drive your car?**  
I have to be very observant when I drive the bus and I find myself also being hyper-observant driving my car.
6. **Have there been any surprises while driving the bus?**
  - Many passengers believe that the DC buses are free but everyone needs to pay the \$2.25 fare
  - Usually the passengers who don't pay are the most demanding
  - There was once a naked lady walking in the street I was driving on
  - If they think I'm driving too slow, some passengers will direct me to go faster
  - Realizing just how many people truly rely on the bus to get to work, school, grocery stores, doctor appointments, etc., and we're lucky to live in a city with such a great public transportation system.

As we were wrapping up the call, I asked Ashley what route he drives and he listed these EIGHT routes!

- C11
- C51
- C27
- C21
- C53
- C37
- C15
- C31

Regina and Sofia happened to be walking by and heard their commuting routes on that list and so did I! We're all hoping he'll be the driver of one of the C buses taking us to work sometime soon!

When asked if he has a GPS giving him directions on the bus routes, he said no, he just has the paper route right/left turn sheet. We couldn't believe how he could drive so many different routes across the city, but he said he prepared by riding those routes as a passenger in his free time.

### Ashley's Passion-filled Path

Ashley's journey from Metrobus passenger to cleaner to operator in just two years is inspiring on its own, but knowing these are his steps towards fulfilling his true passion of providing young people safe and fun opportunities outside of DC thanks to Ashley's bus, makes it that much more special.

*\*The Dutch Reach is a car safety technique designed to prevent dooring accidents, where a vehicle's door is opened into the path of a cyclist or pedestrian. Instead of opening the car door with your nearest hand, use your far hand (the hand furthest from the door handle) to open the door. This action forces you to swivel your body and check your mirrors and blind spot for cyclists or other traffic.*

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## CONNECT ON CORRLINKS *By Aneka*

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



### Free Minds Corrlinks Info:

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

### Free Minds Getting Out Info:

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

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

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

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

# CONVERSACIONES DE MENTES LIBRES FREE MINDS CONVERSATIONS

Por/By Carlos

Saludos Mi gente. Espero con todo mi corazón que al leer este artículo, se encuentren con la mejor salud mental y físicamente. Para los que están con nosotros por primera vez, bienvenidos.

En esta edición de la revista *Connect*, tenemos el tema de Pasión. Una de las definiciones de la palabra pasión es: un deseo o entusiasmo intenso por algo. Creo que en este tema hay tanto que se pueda compartir pero quiero mas que nada contarles algo que aprendí en prisión que con el tiempo se convirtió en una pasión mía.

Cuando estaba en Ohio en una prisión privada, me encontré un libro viejo. Las páginas están bien amarilladas y no blancas y el cubre estaba por despegarse por completo. Fue durante un tiempo que me encontré bajo castigo. Todas las semanas entraban con un carrito lleno de libros. No sé porque ese libro me llamó mucho la atención. Era como si hubiera sobrevivido una tormenta también. Así que lo pedí sin saber ni de que se trataba, ni pregunte. El libro era un libro escolar para aprender a cortar pelo con maquina. Encontré el libro fácil de entender. No se porque pero me interesó tanto. Bueno, pasé nueve meses bajo castigo y use ese tiempo para estudiar el libro. Encontré que la manera como explicaban las técnicas básicas para hacer los borres era de manera comprensible y fácil de seguir. Cada técnica iba acompañado con un dibujo en blanco y negro y también tenía una sección donde explicaba los terminos usados en la barbería. Estaba ansioso por empezar a practicar con una máquina.

Cuando por fin salí de segregación, lo primero que hice fue comprar una máquina de baterías. La vendían en comisaría. Como solo los que trabajaban en la barbería eran los únicos que podían tocar las máquinas, mi única otra opción era aprender con la máquina de batería que en verdad era para rebajar la barba. Lo bueno era que la máquina traía peinetas de diferentes tamaños, lo que sería necesario para borrar las líneas. Empecé a practicar con mi propio pelo primero. No les voy a mentir, mi primer corte fue un desastre total. Lo dañé tanto que tuve que ir a la barbería para que me lo arreglaran. Todos se burlaron del corte que hice. Después de las burlas, si me dieron unos cuantos tips. No me iba a dar por vencido, quería aprender de verdad. Tuve que esperar que mi pelo crezca otra vez para poder intentarlo otra vez.

Mi segundo intento no fue tan malo. Me sentí orgulloso al ver mi resultado final. Si cometí muchos errores y me asegure de mejorar más y más cada vez. Y así empecé! Cuando me sentía un poco más con confianza empecé a practicar con mis amigos. Esos valientes que se sentaban conmigo. Bueno así me fui haciendo mejor y mejor. Para mi era un orgullo porque lo miraba como si fuera algo que yo mismo me enseñe algo. El día de hoy, me encanta cortar pelo, recortar pelo lo miro como una forma de arte, pero lo que más me empezó a gustar es la reacción que tiene la gente después de ver los resultados finales. Me gusta que me digan que el corte lo hace ver mas joven o que lo hace sentir bien por dentro, eso es la pasión mía. Nunca he tenido que ir a una barbería porque siempre me recorto mi propio pelo. Fue lo primero que compré cuando llegué a mi libertad, una máquina profesional. Fue una pasión que creció de la noche a la mañana y todo empezó con un libro que estaba abandonado en ese carrito.

Y ustedes, cuales son sus pasiones. Tienes una historia similar, comparte con nosotros. O si puedes escribir algo en relación con una de tus pasiones lo quisiéramos escuchar. En mi opinión, tener pasión por algo, no necesariamente tiene que ser algo grande. Simplemente algo que te nueva por dentro y te traiga mucho gozo, paz y tranquilidad en el dentro de tu ser.

Greetings everyone. I sincerely hope that as you read this article, you find yourselves in the best possible mental and physical health. For those of you joining us for the first time, welcome.

In this edition of *Connect* magazine, we're focusing on the topic of Passion. One definition of passion is: An intense desire or enthusiasm for something. I believe there's so much to share on this subject, but I mainly want to tell you about something I learned in prison that, over time, became a passion of mine.

When I was in Ohio, in a private prison that was housing us when the Lorton Complex began its early closing stages, I found an old book. The pages were yellowed from age, not white, and the dust jacket was almost completely peeling off. I was in solitary confinement for a while at the time. Every week, they would bring in a cart full of books. I don't know why, but this particular book caught my eye. It was as if it had survived a storm and other abuses. So, without knowing what it was about or asking about it, I asked for it. The book was a school textbook for learning how to cut hair with clippers. I found it easy to understand. I don't know why, but it interested me so much. Well, I spent nine months in solitary confinement, and I used that time to study the book. I found the way they explained the basic techniques for cutting hair to be understandable and easy to follow. Each technique was accompanied by a black and white drawing as well as a reference section to define certain words used. I was eager to start practicing with the clippers.

When I finally got out of segregation, the first thing I did was buy a battery-operated clipper. They sold them at the commissary. Since only the barbers were allowed to use the clippers, my only other option was to learn with the battery-operated one, which was actually meant for trimming beards. The good thing was that the clipper came with different-sized combs, which would be necessary for smoothing out the lines. I started practicing on my own hair first. I won't lie, my first haircut was a total disaster. I messed it up so badly that I had to go back to the barber to get it fixed. Everyone laughed at the cut I gave myself. After the teasing, they did give me a few tips. I wasn't going to give up; I really wanted to learn. I had to wait for my hair to grow back so I could try again.

My second attempt wasn't so bad. I felt proud when I saw the final result. I made a lot of mistakes, but I made sure to improve more and more each time. And that's how I started! When I felt a little more confident, I started practicing with my friends—those brave souls who sat with me. Well, that's how I got better and better. I was proud of it because I saw it as something I was teaching myself. Today, I love cutting hair. I see cutting hair as an art form, but what I've come to love most is the reaction people have after seeing the final results. I like it when they tell me the cut makes them look younger or makes them feel good inside; that's my passion. I've never had to go to a barber because I always cut my own hair. It was the first thing I bought when I became free: a professional hair clipper. It was a passion that grew overnight, and it all started with a book that was lying abandoned in that little cart.

And you, what are your passions? Do you have a similar story? Share it with us. Or if you can write a poem about one of your passions, we'd love to hear it. In my opinion, being passionate about something doesn't necessarily have to be something grand. It simply has to be something that moves you from within and brings you a lot of joy, peace, and tranquility.

# DC PHOTOS *By Neha*

*As requested by our readers*



A mural on the corner of Otis and 13th Street in Columbia Heights NW



Grounded, a Black woman owned plant shop and wellness studio cafe on Martin Luther King Ave. in SE



The Westin DC Downtown hotel and the Equinox Anthem Row apartment building connected via walkbridge located across the street from the Apple Carnegie Library store on K Street NW



Webster St Playground in Petworth NW



The Go-Go Museum & Café located on Martin Luther King Ave. in SE

*Continued on page 18*





# REENTRY PROFILE: MAKING AN IMPACT THROUGH LEADERSHIP AND ADVOCACY – DAMON'S STORY

*By Kaylee*

This month in our *Connect*, we're talking about the theme Passion—the things that fuel our spirits, the things that make us feel whole, and the things that keep us going: our dreams, hobbies, and loves that sometimes help us get through our most difficult times. I had the privilege of talking to Damon who has been home for a little over 2 years, and we talked about his passion for advocacy and community work, how it helped him survive, and how he's been turning that passion into purpose now that he is home.

**Kaylee:** Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me; I know you've been looking forward to it. Can you start off with telling me how long you've been home for?

**Damon:** December 23rd will be 2.5 years. So 29 months or something like that. But believe it or not, it flew so fast that I no longer have that "I just got out here" mentality. I felt like that maybe for the first 90 days but once that newness wore off, it was like, back to business.

**Kaylee:** This month's *Connect* theme is passion. What does that word mean to you personally?

**Damon:** The word can be positive or negative depending upon how you feed it. For me, it means the things that I'm passionate about, the things that I put most of my energy and my time and my finances into. My advocacy work, my art, my activities, books, and plays—2026 is going to be my year. I was just appointed as a board member for Allied Theater Company and Voices Unbarred, a nonprofit that uses theatre to bring social change, and we have some

great things that we're going to do in 2026 as it relates to bringing advocacy to the stage, you know, to the theater. So yeah, passion is a lot.

**Kaylee:** I know you mentioned some of the passions you have are related to advocacy. Can you tell me a little bit about what you do with those passions and how you apply them to your daily life?

**Damon:** I'm a Changemaker and a Poet Ambassador with Free Minds, so we do a lot of community connecting like sharing our stories and sharing the art of some of the incarcerated members. I also work with a number of coalitions, like Building Community Not Prisons which is a national coalition, and we are fighting to end the construction of prisons.

**Kaylee:** Would you say that's a passion you've always had or a passion that started maybe while you were incarcerated or on your journey to coming home?

**Damon:** I think as I reflect back on it, I've always been a spokesman for kids. Even as a kid, like speaking up on a playground. I didn't realize that at the time, but I remember us getting in trouble. I was the one that came up with plans and ideas and all that, but they just didn't always have positive outcomes, you know? So now that I channeled that energy into something different, something positive, it's the same skill set being used. Yeah, I'm from DC, born and raised. But guess what? I spent more time outside of DC than I did inside of DC because I was 19 when I went to prison, and I was 45 when I was released. And I'm 47 now even though I feel 22, you know? Which

makes my passion even more raw.

**Kaylee:** Can you tell me how you stepped into these passions when you were home? What did that look like?

**Damon:** It was gradual. I just try to show up to every situation and be myself and follow what my heart says to do and what I feel like the universe is lining me up to do. Immediately upon release, I was already connected with Free Minds so I joined the weekly Build Up (the Reentry Book Club meeting held virtually on Wednesday nights), where there's 100, 140, 150 people sharing ideas, motivating, and inspiring each other. You know what I mean? Listening. Just building each other up. That foundation, the strength and encouragement is important for a person just returning home. So having that network was vital. And then I got connected to the Georgetown Pivot Program probably 4 months after I got out here. It's a 9 month program focusing on personal development and entrepreneurial leadership for returning citizens. I also learned tech skills. I knew like 4 buttons on the computer: power, enter, backspace, and space bar, but after 9 months, I was doing PowerPoint presentations pre-recorded on Zoom.

So it definitely helped me develop a skill set that I needed, or at least polish it up. Skyland Workforce Center also helped me a lot. Another passion of mine is facilitating youth programming.

I do facilitation work with an organization that provides opportunities for boys and young men from DC to express their innate creative abilities.

**Kaylee:** What advice would you give to a Free Minds member who is currently incarcerated about finding or holding onto their own passions?

**Damon:** First thing I would say is something that one of our Free Minds members told me when I was incarcerated: Don't disconnect yourself from the community. There's going to come a time when you're going to return, in body or in spirit, and that connection is going to be vital, not just for you, but for them too. So cultivate your ideas now. Do the right thing because it's the right thing to do, not

because you expect some law to change or something to pass. Work on your case, but work on yourself. Work on your ideas. It's your responsibility to get yourself prepared for release. You know? They say the best day to plant the tree was 25 years ago.

The next best day is today. So if you haven't been preparing before today, it's all right. But start preparing now. That's what I would say. Be patient. You can make it whatever you want to make it.

**Kaylee:** Lastly, is there anything else you'd like to share with your Free Minds community, both inside and out, about your passion or your personal journey?

**Damon:** I would like to say that Free Minds is more than just a book club and a writing workshop. It's a community of like-minded individuals and sometimes different-minded individuals.

But every community needs people that think differently. "Free Minds" is not just a noun, it's a verb. We work just through our example, just being who we are, coming out here representing what we represent. You know what I'm saying?

Help and reshape the narrative about being people, better entrepreneurs, and better hustlers in the true sense of the word, because sometimes we mistake being a hustler. A hustler supplies a demand. So if that demand is for ideas, clothes, books, or in your family, be that. That's what the true entrepreneur does. He builds better businesses, and if the business is building better men, then he is still instilling in them the courage, competence, confidence, commitment, and consistency that they need to be better men, motivating and educating them.

**Kaylee:** Thank you so much for your answers, Damon, and for being here today and being so positive and taking the time to interview with me.

**Damon:** I have been waiting to be in the Connect, so thank you!

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## CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- ★ JP and JH are new authors.
- ★ DR graduated from the Lead Out program and Atmos program.
- ★ RC is now off supervised probation after 3 years.
- ★ AT, AR, and CM passed their road test and received their drivers license.
- ★ RL completed his security training and landed a security position.
- ★ MW has a new supervisory security role.
- ★ AA received his CDL.

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!

# DC PHOTOS *By Neha*

*As requested by our readers*



Updated photos of the Barry Farms demolition and newly built apartment buildings located next to the Barry Farm Recreation Center on Summer Road

# DC PHOTOS *By Neha*

*As requested by our readers*



A mural in Anacostia designed by Joel Bergner aka Joel Artista, a global artist, educator, and advocate for social change



A mural on Martin Luther King Ave. SE that celebrates the 100th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote. The installation is made of three murals created by three women of color.



Wings & Seafood, We Act Radio, and the Go-Go Museum & Café located on Martin Luther King Ave. in SE

*Continued on page 43*

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

Bonjour Family!

As always I am very appreciative of this opportunity to hang out with y'all, I also wanted to sound fancy at the same time LOL! For those who may not know, "Bonjour" is a French greeting similar to how we say in English "Hey!" or "Good Morning!" In other news, I can't believe that this is the final *Connect* of 2025, time to start churning our thoughts in the direction of new year's resolutions! However, I am jumping way ahead so let me slow down and focus on what I came to talk with you about today, our theme for this month, which is passion. Honestly up until this point, I had no idea of what I was gonna write about, but literally as I was just typing, my heart said write about what you are most passionate about and that has always been helping others.

Ever since I was a child, I have always had a strong and natural desire to help people. It never feels like a burden and it brings me great joy. The actual word for this passion is called altruism. I would even say that because I get so much joy from it, it can tend to be a little selfish maybe? I ask that because it has been found that altruism activates reward centers in the brain. Neurobiologists have found that when a person behaves altruistically, the pleasure centers of their brain become more active. Engaging in compassionate actions activates the areas of the brain associated with the reward system. So question answered, it appears that it is selfish LOL!

Nevertheless, I am very passionate about helping people realize their true worth, value and potential in life and doing my part to contribute to their overall well being. So it's a no brainer that I work for the best non-profit on the planet that totally aligns with my passions and I get to do wonderful things like write to my Free Minds Fam (of course that's you) about all sorts of ways that you can receive the assistance and support that you need once you're back home so please take a look at the information below!

## **GRID Alternatives**

1255 Union St. NE 7th Floor

Washington, DC 20002

Phone: (202) 602-0191

Email: [infodc@gridalternatives.org](mailto:infodc@gridalternatives.org)



GRID Alternatives is a national leader in helping economic and environmental justice communities nationwide get clean, affordable renewable energy, transportation, and jobs. GRID envisions a rapid, equitable transition to a world powered by renewable energy that benefits everyone.

GRID Alternatives is a 501(c)(3) certified non-profit organization. The growing solar industry is creating pathways out of poverty for tens of thousands of workers. Solar today employs over 250,000 people - twice as many people as coal. Most employers are simply looking for training or on-the-job experience. Solar jobs are good jobs. Compared to similar industries, solar wages are competitive and often above the national average (Solar Job Census, 2018).

## **What You'll Learn**

Hands-on solar installation experience is at the heart of GRID's training philosophy. Installation skills learned on their sites include:

- Job site safety
- Fall protection
- Array layout
- Racking installation
- Module level power electronics (MLPE) installation
- Module installation
- Electrical safety
- Electrical layout and mounting
- Conduit bending and installation
- Electrical wiring

Until we *Connect* again!

- Ms. Keela



## BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

with Neely

Thank you to everyone who exercised your right to vote on our next Books Across the Miles selection! I am excited to share that our next book is *The Many Lives of Mama Love: A Memoir of Lying, Stealing, Writing, and Healing* by Lara Love Hardin. Lara'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). A memoir of hope and self-forgiveness, we are so eager to hear your thoughts.



**1.** When reflecting on her relationship with her mom, Lara wonders if showing up as a fake version of yourself is better or worse than not showing up at all. She ultimately decides that any version of yourself is better than no version. What are your thoughts on this? Do you agree?

**2.** As Lara begins to rediscover her love for writing while incarcerated, she shares how writing is the only way she has ever been able to make sense of things. Why do you think writing has the ability to help people process their feelings and experiences? Does writing play a role in your own life?

3. In the chapter, "Push and Pull," Lara contemplates author Mark Nepo's idea that, "*Pain pushes you until vision pulls you.*" She realizes that writing was the vision that was pulling her to a better future for herself and her family. What vision pulls you?

4. Throughout the book, Lara keeps referring back to *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle, a book she read when she was first incarcerated that made a lasting impression on her. Is there a book you have read while incarcerated that transformed the way you think, or had a lasting impact on you?

5. When working on Archbishop Desmond Tutu's book, Lara struggles with the chapter on self-forgiveness. If you were tasked to write a chapter in a book about self-forgiveness, what advice or insight would you want to share?



**NEXT ISSUE’S THEME:  
ANIMAL KINGDOM (VOLUME 15, ISSUE 1)**

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on **Animal Kingdom**.  
The following issue will be **Generations** (Vol. 15, Issue 2).

**(1)**

How are humans connected to animals, both those in the wild and those that live alongside us as pets?  
Do we as humans have a responsibility towards them?

**(2)**

What animal do you relate to the most and why? Write a poem about what that animal means to you.

**(3)**

While the lion is often described as the “king of the jungle,” many people say that this is not true. What do you think?  
Reflecting on the role of a lion in the animal kingdom, write a poem about responsibility and power.

**(4)**

Write a journal entry, short story, or poem reflecting on different perspectives that exist within the animal kingdom, from a tiny ant to a big elephant.

**(5)**

Write a poem about a bird that builds a nest out of broken things.

**(6)**

Fill in the blank poem: The Butterfly in the Wind

In the quiet of \_\_\_\_\_ ,  
a butterfly with \_\_\_\_\_ wings  
rose into the \_\_\_\_\_ light  
and whispered to the wind, "Watch."

So together they moved through the sky,  
one small, one endless,  
learning that even the \_\_\_\_\_  
can teach the \_\_\_\_\_ to be gentle.

With a flutter soft as \_\_\_\_\_ ,  
it traced circles of \_\_\_\_\_ in the air,  
showing the wind how to dance  
without losing \_\_\_\_\_ .

And ever since that day,  
the wind has carried a hint of \_\_\_\_\_ ,  
a memory of the butterfly  
who taught it how to \_\_\_\_\_ .

The wind tried to follow,  
stumbling over \_\_\_\_\_ ,  
until the butterfly laughed like \_\_\_\_\_ .  
"Not like that," it said. "Try again."



# TECH TALK: NAVIGATING ONLINE JOB APPLICATIONS

*By Emily*

When I was in high school, I applied for my first job. I walked to a restaurant near my house, asked if they were hiring, and filled out a paper job application while sitting at one of the restaurant tables. These days, this scenario is less and less likely. Almost everything related to hiring and job applications is **digital** – meaning it is all totally online. In this month's tech column we'll break down tips you can use when you come home for finding trustworthy websites for job searching, filling out online applications, and accessing your most important documents like your resume. As always, if you have a tech question, please write and tell us about it so that we can feature it in the next *Connect*.

## Looking for a Job

When you're looking for a job, sometimes it can feel incredibly overwhelming or like you don't know where to start. There are many websites that have job postings that might be helpful to you. Common websites include [indeed.com](https://www.indeed.com), [linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com), and [idealists.com](https://www.idealists.com). These are websites where employers pay a fee to post their job listings. Sometimes the application is through the employer and sometimes it is through the website where the job is listed. If the latter is true, you may need to make a free account with the website in order to access the job application.

If you have a specific place in mind that you would like to work (for example, maybe you want to work at the grocery store Giant), you can also go directly to their website. Most companies will have a page on their website called "Careers" where you can find job postings. This is also true for places like the DC government.

One thing to look out for are scam job listings. For example, if you get a text or email to your phone from someone claiming to be a recruiter for a company, make sure to read the message carefully. Look at the email address it came from – does it match the company they claim to be representing? Also, try looking up the company online and seeing if you can find any information about them. Often, you will find posts confirming that it was a scam. If you did not sign up for texts from a job board, be very wary of texts that you get unsolicited.

## Filling Out an Online Application

As mentioned above, some job applications are directly through the employer's website and others are through a third party platform like a job posting site. Almost all job applications will require you to make an online account using an email address. It is important to have a "professional" email address. Growing up, one of my friend's email addresses was "i.am.super.kool@gmail.com." While this is totally fine for her personal use, for employers, it is best to use an email that is part or all of your name. Numbers are also fine.

Once you have logged into the website, you will often be asked a series of questions. Typically, you will have to enter your name, address, email, and phone number. Many online job applications will also ask you to fill out any previous employment. Even though all of this information is also on your resume, the website will often require you to type it all out again into their little boxes.

Sometimes, job applications will ask you a few pre-interview questions as well. Again, you will have to type your answers into a small box on the screen. It is a lot easier to fill out these applications on a computer as opposed to on a phone screen. For people who won't have access to a computer, you can always go to any DC Public Library and use theirs for free!

## Accessing your Resume

Finally, all online job applications are going to ask you to upload your resume. It is good to save your resume somewhere where you can easily access it. I recommend using Google Drive. Google Drive comes free with your account when you make a Gmail email address (also free). It is cloud-based, meaning your documents can be accessed as long as you have access to the internet. This is great because no matter if you are using your phone or a computer you can access the important documents that you need.



# JUST LAW: HOW TO WIN EARLY TERMINATION OF SUPERVISED RELEASE: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

*By Tim*

## INTRODUCTION

Early termination of supervised release is a legal process that lets people on probation, parole, or federal supervised release ask the court to end their supervision before the scheduled date. This article outlines the key steps, legal requirements, and practical strategies for success. It draws on the real-life experience of Mr. John Doe (name changed for privacy), a member of the Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop, who successfully achieved early termination by filing his own motion (pro se) in federal court.

## I. UNDERSTANDING THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

### **Federal Law: 18 U.S.C. § 3583(e)(1)**

Under federal law, supervised release may be terminated early if the court is satisfied that such action is warranted by the defendant's conduct and the interest of justice. The statute provides:

"The court may, after considering the factors set forth in section 3553(a)... terminate a term of supervised release and discharge the defendant released at any time after the expiration of one year of supervised release..."

### **The three key requirements are:**

1. At least one year of supervised release served.
2. The defendant's conduct warrants early termination.
3. Early termination is in the interest of justice. The court must also consider certain factors from 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a), such as the nature of the offense, deterrence, protection of the public, and rehabilitation needs.

### **DC Code: Probation and Parole**

For DC Code offenses, early termination of probation or parole is governed by D.C. Code § 24-403.01 and related statutes. The DC Superior Court or the United States Parole Commission may grant early termination if the individual demonstrates rehabilitation, compliance, and that continued supervision is not necessary for public safety.

### **Key Differences**

- Federal supervised release is governed by 18 U.S.C. § 3583(e)(1) and applies to federal convictions.
- DC Code probation/parole is governed by local statutes and may involve different procedures and agencies (e.g., DC Superior Court, US Parole Commission). Both systems require a showing of good conduct and rehabilitation, but the specific factors and process may vary.

## II. REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE: MR. JOHN DOE

### Background

John Doe's journey is a powerful testament to perseverance and self-advocacy within the justice system. Originally sentenced to two life terms on a high-profile case for RICO and narcotics conspiracies in federal court in Washington, DC, John Doe spent 15 years in federal custody beginning in 2004. After successfully appealing his case – proving that his original sentences were “illegal” – he was resentenced in 2016 to 214 months (17 years and 10 months) in prison and five years of supervised release for federal offenses.

After serving more than 41 months of the five years on supervised release (parole), John Doe sought early termination. Despite strong support from his Community Supervision Officer, who advocated for his release multiple times, the head supervisor repeatedly denied the request, citing the seriousness of the offenses and a lengthy criminal history. Undeterred, John Doe took matters into his own hands and filed a pro se motion—acting as his own attorney—to petition the court for early termination of his supervised release.

This case highlights the importance of determination, rehabilitation, and the ability to navigate the legal process, even in the face of significant obstacles.

### Achievements Supporting Early Termination

Doe demonstrated exceptional rehabilitation and adjustment to society. It is suggested that you also include these elements in your motion:

- **Academic Accomplishments:** Doe graduated from Georgetown University Pivot Program and earned certificates in paralegal studies and business.
- **Employment:** Doe worked several jobs upon his release and founded a legal research firm.
- **Community Engagement:** Doe volunteered with youth programs, his book club, and participated in advocacy projects.

### Legal Arguments

Doe's motion cited:

- Eligibility under 18 U.S.C. § 3583(e)(1).
- Satisfaction of the § 3553(a) factors, including rehabilitation, deterrence, and public safety.
- Support from his supervision officer and evidence of community reintegration.

### Judicial Opinions

The DC District Court and DC Circuit have clarified the standards for early termination:

- *United States v. Tanguay*, No. 08-cr-271-RCL-5, 2021 WL 1966602 (D.D.C. 2021): Courts may grant early termination if the statutory requirements and § 3553(a) factors are met.

- *United States v. Mathis-Gardner*, 783 F.3d 1286 (D.C. Cir. 2015): Affirms the application of these standards.

## III. STEPS TO FILE FOR EARLY TERMINATION

### 1. Review Eligibility

- a. Confirm you have served at least one year of supervised release (or the minimum required for probation/parole).
- b. Gather evidence of rehabilitation, compliance, and community contributions.

### 2. Prepare Your Motion

- a. Draft a motion citing the relevant statute (18 U.S.C. § 3583(e)(1) for federal cases; D.C. Code § 24-403.01 for DC cases).
- b. Address the § 3553(a) factors, focusing on rehabilitation, deterrence, and public safety. Include supporting documents (certificates, letters of support, employment records).

### 3. File Pro Se or with Counsel

- a. File the motion with the appropriate court (U.S. District Court for federal cases; DC Superior Court for DC Code cases).
- b. Serve copies to the Clerk of Court and the U.S. Attorney's Office.

### 4. Attend the Hearing (if you are granted one)

- a. Be prepared to answer questions about your conduct, achievements, and plans.
- b. If possible, obtain support from your supervision officer.

## IV. Statutory and Case Law References

- Federal Statutes: 18 U.S.C. § 3583(e)(1); 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a)
- DC Code: D.C. Code § 24-403.01 (probation/parole)
- Key Cases: *United States v. Tanguay* (D.D.C. 2021); *United States v. Mathis-Gardner* (D.C. Cir. 2015); *United States v. Miller*, 738 F.3d 361 (D.C. Cir. 2013).

## V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Early termination of supervised release, probation, or parole is not just a legal possibility—it's a path to reclaiming your freedom and moving forward with your life. Both federal and DC laws allow individuals who have demonstrated rehabilitation, compliance, and positive contributions to society to petition the court for early release. The process requires understanding the relevant statutes (18 U.S.C. § 3583(e)(1) and D.C. Code § 24-403.01), preparing a thorough motion, and presenting strong evidence of your progress. Real-life examples, like John Doe, show that with determination and self-advocacy, success is achievable—even when filing pro se.

For further reading, consult the cited statutes and opinions, and consider reaching out to local legal aid organizations for assistance. I hope this has been helpful!

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



# THE WRITE WAY: TIPS FOR PERSUASIVE WRITING

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

**By Grace**

Who would you trust more to tell you whether a high school should be shut down: its principal who showed you years of records of high test scores and Ivy-League acceptances or a student whose parents transferred them elsewhere after they were bullied for a year without effective intervention from the school? Looking strictly at numbers, one student's negative experience is less evidence than the largely positive outcomes for hundreds of other students. But say you were instead deciding whether to send your child to that high school? You'd probably give more weight to the testimony of the student and their parents than the testimony of the principal.

Humans don't make decisions based solely on logic. To account for this, our strongest writing incorporates a combination of persuasive methods: ethos (or credibility), logos (or fact), and pathos (or emotion). Ethos focuses on getting a reader to trust you and/or your source by presenting them well. For example, when talking about incarceration, you can speak to your own experience as well as quoting others who have been incarcerated. Using logos requires you present readers with facts that back up your argument. When trying to convince readers of the importance of free and reduced school lunches, you might cite a study about the effects of malnutrition on child development. But pathos, the persuasive method I want to focus on today, requires the writer to make emotional appeals to their audience. We see this often in poetry and songwriting. Poets and lyricists weave tales of love lost, maltreatment, or injustice in hopes of creating a story people will find emotional truth in.

Let's go back to the question about the student and the principal. While the principal has credibility and facts on their side—perhaps in the forms of a years-long career and those aforementioned records of positive outcomes—the student actually attended the school, meaning they have a credential

of recent lived experience that the principal does not. The student can recount the fear and humiliation they felt while being bullied and, if they're a passionate writer or speaker, compel their audience to feel for them.

When writing, it's important to contextualize the action with reaction. Even if you're writing fiction, which is probably not about your life, you can still draw from situations in your own life when you felt similarly to your main character or narrator (the character who is telling the story). Stating the specific emotions should be done sparingly; readers will be able to intuit (find out) those themselves if you describe the experience that you had well. You can let your readers into your or your narrator's thoughts by describing bodily reactions to the situation at hand. Did the narrator shiver or begin to sweat or feel their stomach flip with nausea at any point? Intersperse or scatter in key details in response to the action happening in your narrator's surroundings, and your writing will come to life.

Tailor the detail you include in your writing to reflect the mood or tension that you want to convey. Don't describe a room as bright and sunny if your character is having a heartbreaking conversation within its walls; say the room was so stuffy the character felt like they couldn't breathe. Note stimuli like sights, tastes, scents, textures, and noises. And if you don't feel confident writing dialogue or (in the case of nonfiction, when you're recounting something that really happened) can't remember conversations word for word, you can always summarize!

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

# THE MANY INTERESTS OF FREE MINDS: A LOOK INTO WHAT MAKES FREE MINDS' STAFF SOULS SING *by Sofia*

One of the beautiful things about Free Minds is that we're all brought together by a similar passion, which is the power of the literary arts and reading and writing. But all of us, whether that be members, staff, volunteers, or supporters, have so many unique hobbies, interests and passions that make us "us." Read below to hear what the Free Minds staff is passionate about and what they enjoy in their free time. What is a hobby or interest of yours that we might not know about? Did any staff's answer surprise you, or was there a hobby someone shared that you also enjoy, or an answer you would like to know more about? Write to us and let us know!

**Sofia:** I started taking dance classes at the age of 3 and did ballet, modern, contemporary, and jazz until I graduated high school. I also tap danced until I was 12. While I stopped training in college, dance always holds a special place in my heart and I'll never stop moving my body! As an adult, I've expanded my dancing horizons to keep my passion alive and have taken salsa and bachata classes, both Latin styles of partner dance. I also started regularly taking samba (a Brazilian style) and love dance cardio classes!

**Regina:** I have really been enjoying sharing and reading my poetry at open mics lately. It has been really helping me with my delivery and stage fright!

**Neha:** I'm a third degree black belt in karate, and I'm passionate about all styles of martial arts! I especially enjoy striking styles of fighting, such as kickboxing, because of the strategy involved. While I have become distant from martial arts due to capacity, it has always served to guide me in life, so I hope to return to it soon!

**Kaylee:** One of my hobbies is scrapbooking! Which you can also call "junk journaling." I collect stickers, pictures, receipts, all kinds of random things, and I put them on pages and try to make them as creative as possible. It's important that I capture all my firsts or remember all the things I've done or places I've been to. It is truly therapeutic, and it is really nice to look back on all your memories.

**Tara:** I love watching documentaries and discussing them with a group of current and former film and TV news and documentary producers. We call it "Docos and Dialogue." It's like a book club where we all pick different topics and discuss the content and the choices the producers and directors make. It's virtual as folks in it are located all over the world.

**Jamilah:** Right now, I'm focusing on laying the groundwork for a secure retirement, something that once felt distant and unimportant in my younger days. My passion lies in family, and I am deeply committed to nurturing our bonds to ensure we remain a tight-knit unit, which brings me joy. We actively support each other through life's challenges and take the time to celebrate our individual achievements, both big and small. Our group chat buzzes with daily check-ins, creating a warm space where we can all feel connected, no matter the distance. I absolutely love baking! It's such a fun way for me to bring family and friends together and share my delicious treats.

**Jeffrey:** I love watching and making movies! My favorite films that I've recently watched are *One Battle After Another* and *Bitter Rice*, and this fall I made my third ever short film (and I'm making my fourth on Saturday).

**Aneka:** I love hiking, kayaking, crocheting, doing hair and nails, and most of all traveling! But if I had to narrow it down, I would say traveling is my #1 passion. It's something about seeing new places and cultures that keeps me humble and grounded. I truly enjoy seeing how much the world has to offer!

**Neely:** A hobby I developed during COVID is cooking different dishes from around the world. I challenge myself by only making recipes written by

someone who is from that country, which means there have been times when I have had to do some translating. 😊 It's really eye-opening and introduces me to new ingredients and cooking methods that I otherwise probably would have never explored. It also sends me on shopping journeys to a variety of grocery stores that specialize in different regional ingredients, from African to Asian to Hispanic and beyond, which is always fun!

**Julia:** I have always loved fantasy and science fiction (mostly books, but TV and movies too). These days, I lean more towards science fiction in terms of my own writing but I still love both genres and will happily share my recommendations with anyone who wants to listen. Some of my favorite sci-fi and fantasy authors these days are N.K. Jemisin, Ann Leckie, Simon Jimenez, and Tamsyn Muir. I'm also a passionate supporter of our local women's soccer team, the Washington Spirit!

**Geoff:** Over the last two years I've gotten back into bar trivia. It's been a nice way for me to socialize with a group of friends that I didn't see regularly, and it's always nice to get to feel like a smarty pants when you know something obscure. The competitiveness is just the right level for me because even when I'm fired up about our score (or our rival's score) it's hard to take hanging out in a bar and guessing things too seriously.

**Erick (Mentes Libres book club facilitator):** I've been doing film photography since 2014 as a way of being more present when I travel or spend time with loved ones. I prefer film because I have to be more intentional with each step and patient with the outcome. I was even developing my own film for 5 years!

**Carlos:** I have been cutting hair since I was in prison. I would love to go to school and learn it officially. I think it's a form of art.

**Kelli:** One of my hobbies I'm passionate about is hiking. I just love to be outdoors in nature, enjoying fresh air, peeping the wildflowers, different types of trees and looking out for wildlife. I especially love going hiking when I visit new places. My favorite is a hike that takes me high up in the hills or mountains to a lookout point from where I can look back down to the place I started!

**Grace:** I've been writing songs on my guitar since I taught myself to play when I was fifteen! In college, I completed minor studies in music to turn songs that had just been lyrics and chords into arrangements with instruments such as piano, trumpets, saxophone, violin, and cello. For years it's been a great form of self-expression and self-soothing.

**Rebecca:** One hobby I really love is baking! I find the whole process of putting ingredients together to be very therapeutic. In the chaos of the world, there's something very comforting about following a series of steps and ending up with something delicious. I also really enjoy challenging myself with more complex recipes on occasion so I can stretch my baking skills. My culinary goals for this year include soft pretzels, ciabatta bread, and tarte tatin.

**Jordan:** I would have to agree with Aneka and say traveling. I try to travel as much as time allows me to, but seeing a scenery different than the DMV brings me peace of mind. I can only imagine traveling outside of the country (which I will do soon). I hope to get to Italy, England, and Japan in the near future.

**Tony:** So, my main hobby is my PS5. I've enjoyed the peace of video games since I was a kid, so it provides therapy for me now. Another hobby of mine is baking. Baking has always been peaceful and therapeutic for me.



# IN THE NEWS

By Grace, Free Minds Prison Book Club Intern

## DEEP DIVE: GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN AND REOPENING

The federal government's record-long shutdown finally ended November 12th. The shutdown began October 1st with Congress unable to pass an agreed-upon budget by that date. 43 days later, the House passed legislation, later signed by President Trump, to allow the government to remain open until January 30th.

The shutdown saw a high number of federal employees furloughed, meaning their employers were unable to pay them their usual salaries. Many were told to remain home from work, but certain essential federal workers remained at their posts without pay. They eventually began receiving back pay when the government reopened.

Government shutdowns deprive federal workers of their incomes and leave many unable to buy basic household necessities. Past shutdowns have resulted in periods of economic decline, also called recessions. This shutdown resulted in an estimated \$11-billion-dollar loss in economic activity.

Air traffic controllers, who keep passenger, freight, private, and military flights safely separated in the sky, were one essential position forced to work without pay. Many Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) facilities were understaffed even before the shutdown.

A lack of staffing at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport is yet to be ruled out as a cause of the January 2025 plane crash between a commercial flight and a military helicopter that claimed 67 lives.



Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport FAA tower

During the shutdown, the FAA was forced to reduce flights by 10% for safety, resulting in many flights being cancelled. The FAA says it plans to hire 8,900 new controllers by 2028, though the funding for those positions remains uncertain.

## NATION

The first general elections since President Trump retook office saw an influx of Democratic Party candidates elected. Notable wins include New York City Mayoral Elect Zohran Mamdani and New



New York City Mayoral Elect Zohran Mamdani, New Jersey Governor Elect Mikie Sherril

Jersey and Virginia Governor Elects Mikie Sherril and Abigail Spanberger. State elections led to Democrats retaining 3 seats in Pennsylvania's Supreme Court and Virginia House Democrats flipping 13 seats from Republican to Democrat. Democrats hope the influx of Party members will lead to a Democratic House majority being elected in the 2026 midterms.

## WORLD

On Tuesday, November 25, 2025, protests on the coast of Syria broke out against violence toward Alawites, a minority religious group offshoot of Shiite Islam in the majority Sunni and Shia Muslim country. Since a Sunni Islamist rebellion took power last year, Alawites—who practice the religion of former dictator Bashar al-Assad's family—have faced vandalism, kidnappings, and killings. The previous weekend in Homs, one of Syria's largest cities, Alawite protesters ignited protests by killing a Sunni Muslim couple.

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China and Japan are in conflict over Taiwan. At the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, the communist government claimed control of the Republic of China (ROC), renaming it the People's Republic of China (PRC). Many capitalists fled to Taiwan, and Taiwan has since operated as a sovereign island nation. In the intermediate years, Taiwan has been subject to the PRC government's insistence of power over the region. On November 7, Japan's new Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi spoke out on behalf of Taiwan, saying that a threat to Taiwanese sovereignty would be viewed as a threat to Japan. Taiwan lies just southwest of Japan, and multiple American military bases are located on Japan's southern islands.



Map of China and Taiwan

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On November 21, gunmen kidnapped 303 children and 12 teachers from a Catholic school in Nigeria's Niger State. Fifty of the children have escaped, and the Nigerian military is leading a search-and-rescue mission to recover the remaining 253. Schools in neighboring states have temporarily closed. In the days since, no group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

# IN THE NEWS

By Grace, Free Minds Prison Book Club Intern

Though it is ambiguous whether the attacks were motivated by a sectarian (religious/political) agenda, Pope Leo XIV has called for the release of the students. President Trump claimed Nigerian Christians were facing a genocide and threatened cuts to foreign aid and American military intervention.

## SPORTS

The Washington Commanders' season is currently disappointing fans who'd expected better after Washington's 12-5 finish and NFC Championship exit last year. The Commanders started this season 3-2 but then went on a six-game losing streak. Currently 3-8, there's little hope for Washington's season. The one bright spot is Quarterback Jayden Daniels reportedly returning to practice this week after dislocating his elbow in a Week 9 loss to the Seattle Seahawks. However, it's unlikely Daniels will play in the team's next game against the Denver Broncos.

The Washington Wizards sit firmly at the bottom of the NBA's Eastern Conference, with a 1-15 record.

The hope for Washington's men's winter sports this year lies with the National Hockey League's (NHL) Capitals. The potential final season for superstar Alex Ovechkin, whose contract will expire July 1, 2026, comes after Ovechkin broke the league's all-time goal-scoring record this past April. Though the start to their season was rocky, the Capitals now hold a wild card playoff berth at 12-9-2 for the season so far. The team should improve further with defensive center Pierre Luc Dubois's expected return from injury in a few months.

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On Saturday, November 22nd, the Washington Spirit, DC's women's soccer team, played in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) Championship Final against New York/New Jersey's Gotham FC. After losing the final last season to the Orlando Pride, hopes of a happier ending this year were high for Trinity Rodman and the Spirit. The game was tied at 0-0 for an astounding 80 minutes, but a goal from Gotham's Rose Lavelle broke the deadlock and won Gotham the Championship.

For 30-year-old Lavelle, a Women's FIFA World Cup Champion and Olympic gold medalist with the US Women's National Team, the NWSL Championship was the final jewel in her impressive crown. Being named Most Valuable Player was just a bonus.

23-year-old Rodman, who was out for large portions of the season with a back injury and an MCL sprain, the season's ending comes with doubts about her return to Washington next season. Her contract expired the day after the match, leaving her a free agent, with multiple teams from England's Women's

Super League reportedly interested in signing her and NWSL Commissioner Julie Berman quoted saying the league will "fight for [Rodman]" to stay. Wherever she ends up, elite medical staff who can continue to help rehab her back injury will likely be a high priority for Rodman.

In other women's sports news, the Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) has announced a PWHL Takeover Tour game between the Montreal Victoire and the New York Sirens at Capital One Arena on January 18, 2026. The PWHL recently expanded from its original six teams up to eight with the new teams in Seattle and Vancouver coming after markedly high attendance in games played in those cities last season. A good turnout at Capital One in January could result in the PWHL returning to the District—this time, to stay.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Many are looking forward to the final season of the hit Netflix science-fiction thriller *Stranger Things*. The first four episodes will release November 26, with three more episodes coming out on Christmas Day and the finale coming out on New Year's Eve.

Fans can tune in to see the final battle between the citizens of Hawkins and mysterious creatures of the parallel universe beneath their town called "The Upside Down."

However, eyes are being drawn away from the press tour with the release of British pop star Lily Allen's album *West End Girl*. The album allegedly detailed the ending of her marriage to actor David Harbour, who plays Hawkins Chief of Police Jim Hopper on *Stranger Things*.

The controversy resulting from Allen's album is just one more setback the show faces. Because of the show's long production times and the delays forced by the pandemic and the Screen Actor's Guild strike, *Stranger Things* has been plagued by years-long wait times between seasons. Some fans have grown frustrated with or lost interest in the show.



Stranger Things series poster

# 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!*

*Due to the short publishing turnaround time we have a question from a Free Minds reentry member with advice from fellow Free Minds reentry members. Members like RC have asked for advice about reconnecting with teen/adult children after being away for awhile. TS and the other Advice Men will be back in the next issue!*

Dear Advice Man,

I have a young adult son who is having trouble figuring out what he wants to do with his life and it's becoming frustrating. He has graduated from high school, attended a year of college, has no criminal background, and has had a few odd jobs that didn't last. He doesn't contribute to the family's household in any way. All he does is play video games all day. He currently receives unemployment, which is scheduled to end in the next two weeks, and to my knowledge he has not been actively looking for a job. There are moments when I bring these issues to his attention but it always ends up turning into an argument. Many people have told me that I need to be more hard on him. I feel like being more hard only causes conflict because he is an adult and feels like he can do whatever he wants. I really want to see him thrive and succeed but I'm just not sure how else to support him. What feedback do you have that will help me better support my son while not feeling like I am enabling him in the process?

RC

Dear RC,

*Thank you for sharing this challenging issue. It is clear you have great love for your son. That is a beautiful thing. I can relate to what you are going through as I had a similar experience with my son after I returned home after being away. The main advice I would give is to create and hold boundaries. You are not doing any favors for your son as he is not being given the chance to hold responsibilities. I learned that instead of conflict I would have consequences, like time away from video games. He needs to be a contributing member of the household. It's not fair to you and the other members of your family that he is not being held to the same accountability. I know it is very hard but if you establish those clear boundaries and requirements, and he doesn't follow them, he will need to know the consequences that the privilege of living there supported by other family members will have to end. I know you feel an obligation as a parent but what about an obligation to yourself and your other family members. He will learn what he needs to do once he does not experience all the benefits. I send you strength as it is not an easy thing to do. He might also be suffering from depression or another mental health challenge. You can offer to help him find support for those challenges if he is, but he needs to seek the help for himself. Setting boundaries might help him seek the help that he might need. Know that you are showing him true love by doing this. For me, it was hard to do this with my son but setting boundaries like this opened the door to us building a really strong, respectful relationship.*

DS

Dear RC,

*Your frustration is valid, and you're not alone. The key is setting clear, non-negotiable expectations without turning it into a fight. Your son is an adult, and adults respond better to boundaries than to nagging.*

*Have one calm conversation where you lay things out plainly: unemployment is ending, he needs to contribute to the household, and doing nothing is no longer an option. Offer support help with a resume, job search, or career planning but make it clear that the responsibility is his.*

*You're not being "hard"; you're giving him structure. And structure is often exactly what young adults need to move forward.*

Craig, Free Minds Peer Support Specialist & Member

Dear RC,

*I can only imagine how overwhelming it may be at times trying to raise a man on your own. I salute you and all mothers alike. I have to say first that it is a blessing that he is at your arms length, the youth can get lost so easily. We as parents fear this.*

*You have to live by your own words, that you want to help him but not enable him. Though you will forever be his mother, you can never be his anchor. Being hard "is" you helping him become a successful man. If your fear is that after being hard on him, he will leave? That may be what you need to do, let him go. Most of us have learned about life after leaving home. When we learned that life requires responsibilities and duties.*

*What if you set up an evening with him to lighten the mood and have a conversation with him. Set a couple of ground rules (created by both) to avoid argumentation. When having this conversation, let him know how much you appreciate his presence. When you begin to talk about these issues, remember to talk "with" him and not "at" him. Not saying you do take this approach, but as parents we will always look at our children as our babies. Listen to his needs, what his issues may be. Come with some job opportunities that he may like, or seek a few job fairs in the city that he can go to. Let him know what you need and expect from him. Let him know that you as a mother are serious. Tell him the changes that will take place if not met by him. Set a deadline and when you take action, stand on it. Don't let him think you are just crying wolf.*

*There is no blueprint on how to be a good parent, let alone how to raise a man. But as a reminder, you have done well so far and you should be proud of that as you continue to address this with him. Wish you both the best.*

Carlos, Free Minds Community Outreach Facilitator & Member

# MEDITATION: THE FLAME WITHIN *By Kelli*

Have you ever heard of the term “flow?” Psychologists use it to describe a mental state of complete absorption in something you love doing – a moment when time seems to disappear and you’re fully present. When we enter a *flow state*, distractions fade, our focus deepens, and we feel a sense of energized peace. Flow happens when there’s a balance between the challenge of what we’re doing and our own skill level.

I’ve experienced this many times and highly recommend seeking it! Most recently, on a Sunday afternoon, I went to one of my favorite spots: a lively coffee shop in my neighborhood called Kaldi’s Social House. It’s always full of a diverse mix of people of different ages, backgrounds, and stories. Some are working on laptops, others are simply enjoying their coffee and conversation. I often find myself wondering what each person might be creating: a dissertation? a long letter to someone they love? maybe even the next great American novel?

I go there to pursue my own passion – writing – in a space filled with good energy, good people-watching, and really good coffee. I can sit for hours, sipping a mocha latte and letting the words flow. When everything clicks, I reach that *flow state*. I am completely absorbed, focused, and free. You might think it’s just the caffeine talking (and that’s a fair point!), but for me, it’s something deeper. Writing is where I feel most alive. Regardless of how the words come out, in those moments I feel connected to something that matters to me. Reading and writing are like a flame inside me. A quiet light that reminds me who I am.

Today, I invite you to reflect on your own flame within. Let’s take a few minutes to meditate on the passions that live inside each of us...those things that bring meaning, energy, and purpose to our days. As I always suggest, you can take turns reading the meditation aloud with a friend, or simply read through it once or twice on your own before closing your eyes and letting the words settle in. Either way, let it be an opportunity to reconnect with what lights you up inside.

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*Find a comfortable place to sit, or if you prefer, you can lie down. Begin by taking a deep breath in...and let it out slowly. Once more, inhale deeply and exhale completely. Allow your shoulders to relax, your jaw to soften, and your whole body to settle. For these few minutes, simply be here. You don’t have to be anywhere else or anyone else. Right now, it’s just you, your breath, and this moment. You are enough, just as you are.*

*Imagine your breath as a gentle wave, rising as you inhale, falling as you exhale. Feel the rhythm of your body: steady, calm, and alive. Within you, there is something that can never be taken away. It is your inner spark – your passion, your curiosity, your drive to create, to grow, to love. This spark might sometimes feel buried, but it never goes out. Even in the darkest places, it glows quietly, waiting for you to notice it.*

*Take a moment to remember something that once made you feel alive. It could be a hobby, a dream, a skill, or a way you helped others. Or it might be something new you’ve discovered, something that brings you peace, joy or focus. Picture yourself doing that thing now. See your hands moving with purpose. Feel the meaning it brings. Feel the satisfaction of expressing who you are through something that matters to you. That feeling is your passion speaking to you.*

*Your passion doesn’t depend on where you are. It lives inside you. Even here, even now, you can nurture it by learning, reflecting, imagining, and preparing. Passion isn’t just about doing; it’s about being connected to what lights you up inside. Maybe your passion is writing, drawing, music, or helping others find peace. Maybe it’s creating something new in your mind each day or simply becoming a better version of yourself. Whatever it is, it belongs to you. No wall, no door, no circumstance can touch your inner flame.*

*Take another deep breath in, and as you breathe out, imagine feeding that flame...giving it air and attention. Feel it warming you from within, reminding you that you are still becoming, still growing. Know that pursuing your passion isn’t about perfection or recognition; it’s about fulfillment. It’s about honoring what makes you you. When you follow what inspires you, you turn each day into a step toward freedom...freedom of the heart and mind.*

*Now, silently repeat to yourself:*

*My passion lives within me.*

*I am free to grow from the inside out.*

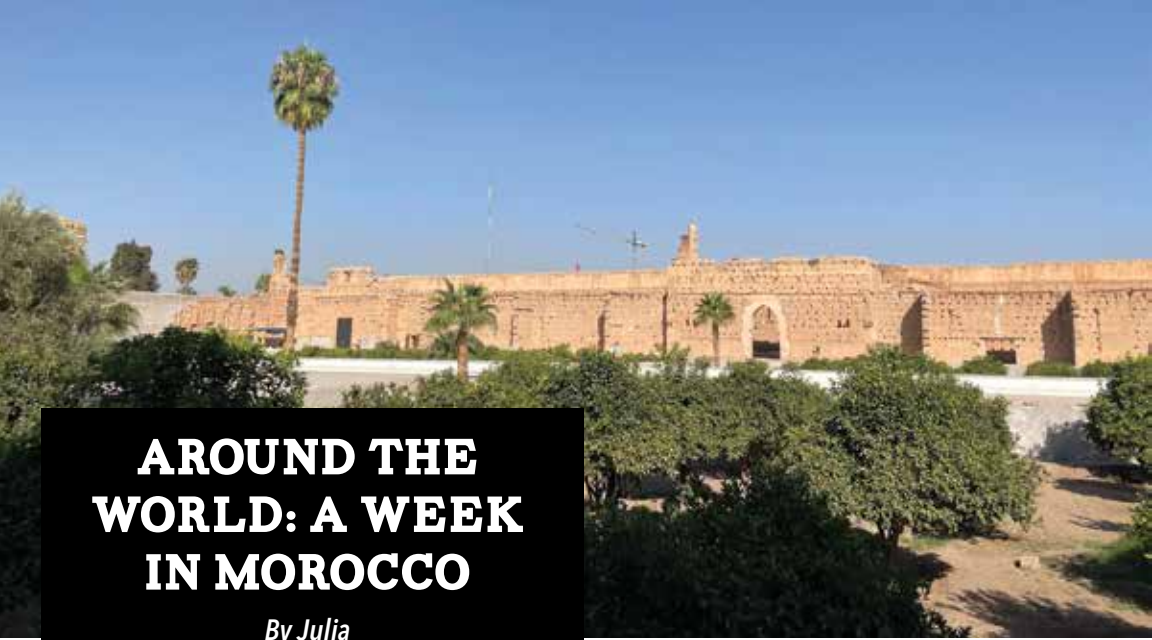
*I create meaning in my life every day.*

*Let those words settle in your chest and feel their truth.*

*As you prepare to return to your day, carry this sense of purpose and passion with you. Remember, fulfillment begins within. Each breath, each thought, each small act of care for yourself or others feeds the flame. Take one last deep breath in and slowly exhale. Feel calm. Feel centered. Feel ready to keep walking your path, with passion as your quiet, steady light.*







# AROUND THE WORLD: A WEEK IN MOROCCO

*By Julia*

A grove of orange trees inside the ruins of the Badi Palace

Hey FM Fam! For today's "Around the World" edition, we're going on a trip to Morocco. Now I know Jamilah took us all there with her a couple issues ago, but I hope you won't mind reading about it again. Earlier this year, a friend of mine asked me if I wanted to go to Morocco with her and my immediate answer was YES! I love visiting parts of the world that I haven't seen before. One of my life goals is to visit every continent on the planet (except for Antarctica – I can pass on that one) and I had never been to Africa before, so I was also excited to get one step closer to my goal.

We only had a week and we wanted to see a lot, so we started in the city of Casablanca (it's where the international airport is). We were only in Casablanca for about a day, but here we had our first taste of tajine, a big part of Moroccan cuisine. Tajine (or tagine) refers both to the food and to the pot that it's cooked in, an earthenware pot (pictured) here that traps the steam while the food is cooking, making the meat extremely tender and flavorful. Our favorite tajine of the whole trip was a beef tajine with prunes that we had at a humble little restaurant near our hotel in Casablanca. Now I usually don't find the thought of prunes appealing, but they gave the beef this delicious, almost cinnamon-like flavoring. We couldn't get enough, and proceeded to eat different kinds of tajine nearly every day!



A chef preparing tajine dishes in a restaurant

After Casablanca, we headed to the desert city of Marrakech, where we stayed for most of our trip. Marrakech is definitely a tourist destination, with lots of historical and cultural sites to see. We enjoyed exploring historical sites like the tranquil Badi Palace (the ruins of a 16th-century palace from the Saadian dynasty, which today houses a small museum as well as an active orange grove) and the beautiful Ben Youssef Medersa (a school, also built in the 16th century, for students of religion and other disciplines). Some of my favorite experiences in Marrakech though were the lively Jemaa el Fnaa square and dense, labyrinthine markets known as the souks.



Inside the Ben Youssef Medersa, a school dating back to the 16th century

The Jemaa el Fnaa square is a large plaza in the city that fills with people every night to take in live music, dance, and other performances. There are also vendors selling fresh fruit and other food. I absolutely loved walking through this scene at night. I would just walk up to one cluster of people and watch the musicians or dancers gathered there, then walk a few feet in another direction to another cluster and another group of performers. The square was also just south of the

souks, the dense warren of narrow alleys filled with vendors selling all sorts of things, like clothing, crafts, cosmetics, herbs, olives, household goods...even live turtles! These narrow lanes were packed with people, and I had to stay alert to dodge the motorcycles weaving through--and the donkeys pulling carts behind them! I swear, you could spend hours wandering through those souks and taking in the sights. I almost got lost in there one day but I found my way.



Inside the souks, the narrow markets in Marrakech

From Marrakech, we also took a couple day trips--one to the Atlas Mountains, where (like Jamilah), we visited a Berber village and hiked to a beautiful waterfall. The Berbers (also known as Amazigh or Imazighen) are the indigenous (native) peoples in North Africa, who have their own unique language and culture. Our guide who led us on a hike through the mountains, who was Berber himself, told us that the majority of people in Morocco have Berber ancestry. The Berber flag (pictured) includes a character in their language that roughly translates to "free men," honoring resistance and those who lost their lives in the struggle for liberation.

on the Atlantic Ocean. In Rabat, we toured the city's historic kasbah (citadel), which was built in the 12th century, and the Andalusian Gardens inside, a beautiful garden designed to look like paradise on Earth. From Rabat, we also visited a nearby coastal town called Asilah, known for its vibrant art scene and picturesque medina (the historic part of the town), characterized by white walls with bright, colorful paintings and murals. Asilah hosts an annual art festival, and our tour guide here told us that artists paint new murals for the festival every year--so the ones we saw on our trip will be gone and replaced with new murals this time next year. We also appreciated learning that arts education is an important part of children's education in Asilah. My friend and I both remarked to each other that if we had the opportunity to come back, we would love to spend more time in Asilah, and maybe even visit during the annual festival!



A wall decorated with the Berber flag

On another day, we drove about an hour from Marrakech to see the Agafay Desert, where we had the opportunity to ride camels through the rolling desert hills, and take in a beautiful sunset and starry night sky, far from the lights of the city. Towards the end of our trip, we departed from Marrakech and headed north to Rabat, the capital of Morocco, which is



The coastal town of Asilah



Camels in the Agafay Desert



The painted streets inside Asilah

# CONVERSATION WITH JAMILAH

Hey Free Minds Family,

My name is Jamilah, and I am the Reentry Programming and Training Manager at Free Minds. With more than 10 years of experience in workforce development, I am passionate about helping individuals overcome barriers and find meaningful employment. For the past four years, I've had the honor of supporting members of Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop. Once you're home, I look forward to meeting with you in person to explore the reentry programs and opportunities that can help you achieve your goals.

This edition of the Connect magazine theme is "Passion." I am happy to have this conversation with you concerning my passions, interests, and hobbies. When I hear the word "Passion," I think of an intense love for someone or something, a deep infatuation, a craving, or even an obsession. This topic got me reflecting on what I truly love, crave, and obsess over. What activities bring me that intense joy? And have any of them caused me pain or suffering?

After some thought, I realized my passions center around family, health and wealth, and baking.

I say family because my greatest passion is my family. Family is everything to me, a precious gift from God. While I can't control how or why my family is composed as it is, I can control how I love and nurture our bonds to ensure we remain a close-knit unit. Over the years, I've learned that family doesn't always mean blood relations. God has brought people into my life without any blood ties who are also very dear to me.

My dedication to family is evident in my daily actions. I am the one who organizes all our family gatherings and vacations. I take joy in creating menus for our family dinners and planning fun activities to enjoy afterward, such as playing card games, karaoke, or watching a good movie together.

However, it's not all fun and games. My passion for my family has also faced challenges, including the pain of losing loved ones, dealing with illness, or helping family members who are struggling financially. During these difficult times, my commitment to my family intensifies. Often, I don't even realize what I'm doing; I simply know that my family needs me, and I want to do my best to support and be there for them.

My newfound passion lies in health and wealth. At 53 years old, I realize that I have more years behind me than ahead of me. As my aunt likes to say, "half a century!" (LOL!) During the first half of my life, I didn't take health or wealth seriously, which has left me playing catch-up. Recently, I have become deeply committed to improving my habits. I am focusing on eating better, managing my weight, caring for my mental and emotional well-being, saving money, investing wisely, planning for retirement, and creating generational wealth for my children. I've come to understand that it's never too late to get your life in order, but starting sooner is always better. Baking is my hobby and a passion I've had since I was eight years

old. I remember watching my grandmother during the holiday season as she made three different cakes: chocolate, coconut, and pound cake, which were her favorites. She would also make pecan pies and sweet potato pies. I was captivated by every detail, from the ingredients to the measurements. Though she often tried to get me to leave the kitchen, saying I was in the way, I refused to budge. I needed to see everything and, of course, lick the bowl!

I started by baking cookies for my friends and then moved on to cupcakes. Soon, the kids in my neighborhood began coming to my house looking for baked goods. During the summer, I held weekly bake sales. My cupcakes were always made from a box cake mix, but my cookies were made from scratch. I particularly enjoyed making sugar cookies, chocolate chip cookies with walnuts, and oatmeal raisin cookies. Eventually, I mastered the cakes my grandmother used to make, creating them from scratch.

Baking gave me a sense of purpose. I became an essential part of family dinners, birthday parties, and any other family events involving food and desserts. I took great pride in my baked goods, and it became my love language. If I cared for you or considered you a good friend, you didn't need to ask; I would show up with the sweets.

However, this passion also brought some challenges. In 2014, I was diagnosed with diabetes, which left me feeling defeated, and I stopped baking for two years. I understood that continuing to bake could jeopardize my health, because I didn't know how to balance baking and managing my diabetes. It was painful to turn down requests for my baked goods, especially since baking had become a side hustle, which affected my finances. Eventually, I learned to bake without tasting the end products myself. I began asking others to taste-test for me. Some of my most requested items now include carrot cake, strawberry cream cakes, pound cakes, cheesecakes, bean pies, and banana pudding. I've even had the pleasure of making two very huge wedding cakes.

At the end of the day, passion is what gives our lives flavor and meaning. It's the spark that pushes us through hard times and reminds us what truly matters. My journey has taught me that passion doesn't always show up as excitement or fireworks; sometimes it shows up quietly, in the way we show up for family, care for our health, or pour love into something as simple as a homemade cake.

As I look back, I realize that my passions have evolved with me. The things that fueled me in my twenties aren't the same as what drives me now in my fifties, and that's okay. What once brought me excitement now brings me peace, and the things I used to take for granted have become essential. Passion, I've discovered, isn't about chasing perfection; it's about finding joy and purpose in the everyday moments that shape who we are. So, to my Free Minds family: take time to discover what sets your soul on fire. Whether it's your art, your writing, your loved ones, or your dreams, hold onto it, nurture it, and let it remind you that life is meant to be lived with intention and heart. Because when it is all said and done, passion is what turns ordinary days into extraordinary stories.



# PAYING IT FORWARD: YOUNG PLAYWRIGHTS' THEATER

By Rebecca

Imagine this: You're standing on a stage performing a play that you wrote. A captivated audience hangs on your every word. You close your eyes for a moment, unsure if this is real. When you open your eyes again, you realize this isn't a dream. This is really happening. Young Playwrights' Theater is in the business of making moments like this a reality.



Founded in 1995 by award-winning playwright Karen Z., Young Playwrights' Theater (YPT) is a nonprofit that provides instruction in playwriting and artistic expression to inspire young people to realize the power of their voices. An integral aspect of YPT's mission is to prioritize young people who are targeted by systems of oppression. YPT is explicit about serving Black and brown students and strategically partners with schools and organizations in the community that serve underserved communities. For example, they partner with SMYAL, which is an organization in Capitol Hill that serves LGBTQ+ youth, providing artistic experiences to young people whose voices aren't represented or appreciated. As YPT's artistic director Farah H. shares, "It's an intentional way to be able to provide an outlet and an opportunity for these young people to flourish."

To enact their mission, YPT provides a variety of programming. There is in-school programming, where a teaching artist works with an elementary, middle school, high school, or college class, and the students develop a play. YPT's education team creates curricula for each of the grade levels, sometimes tailoring programming to the needs of the school. There is also after-school programming, and, for public engagement, there are productions. YPT gives the public opportunities to see what young people are working on and are concerned about. I got to experience this firsthand last October when I attended the performance of an incredible original play, *Riot: The Beat of Freddie Gray*, written and performed by Ty'ree D., who was participating in YPT's Young Playwrights in Progress program. The production development process starts with a young person having a script or even just an early idea of a script. Farah advises the young artist, giving them specific, detailed feedback on their script as well as homework assignments to help the writer hone and revise their piece. This process culminates in a public presentation of the play. The cool thing about this, Farah notes, is "developing young, emerging artists without having the barriers that usually come up... If you don't have a [Masters of Fine Arts degree] in playwriting, it's hard for a lot of theaters to take you seriously or want to produce your work, and I don't think it should be that way... That's the purpose of this [program], to be able to get young people's work out there, for them to not have to deal with the gatekeepers of this industry, and for them to receive an experience where their words are valued and they're nurtured as young artists."


The production wing of YPT also includes a social justice

performance series that Farah started ten years ago called *Silence is Violence*. This series, which started in the wake of the killing of Mike Brown and the uprising in Ferguson, focuses on topics that are important to young people, including police brutality, immigration, and LGBTQ+ issues. One of Farah's favorite *Silence is Violence* productions centered on the topic of mothering while Black. "I worked with some young mothers who were in transitional housing," Farah shares. "I went to their transitional house six times, taught them writing workshops, and from the writing they did and interviews that I conducted with them, I wrote a choreopoem<sup>1</sup> that featured five actresses who portrayed the five young women, and they got to see their stories acted out. They sat in the front row, we provided babysitting services for them ... so they could just enjoy the show and be part of the talk back and get their flowers for their resilience and how far they've come on the journey." What was the impact for the women who participated in that program? "It was transformative for them... One of the young women [said], 'I had no idea I was that strong'... Months later, she had moved out and gotten her own place with her son and was working for DC government. She felt empowered by that performance."

The benefits of YPT's work go beyond its participants, positively benefiting the community at large. One alumna (graduate) who Farah taught is now working at an after-school program in Northern Virginia, helping kids write. Another alumna is a career counselor at Northwestern High School. "Seeing that they were impacted enough by this programming that they want to do the same thing for young people, it's like paying it forward... I feel like helping develop or nourish the confidence and the creativity of young people has a greater ripple [effect] on society. To have young people who have pride in their work and in their ideas, who believe that they have something to contribute to the world. That's the next generation. That's who's going to be in charge of this country when we're no longer here." In addition, the public performances bring the community out to see things they wouldn't ordinarily see. Performances take place at the Takoma location of Busboys and Poets (a local chain that is a combination of restaurant, bookstore, and performance space), and that's very intentional. "The reason it's important for me that we do [performances] at Busboys and Poets is so that it is a space that's accessible for others... That isn't a stuffy theater space where folks might not feel welcome... I've gone to plays and I'm an artistic director... but I've had people treat me like I don't know where I'm at or, 'Is this your first play?' 'Are you supposed to be here?' And I never want anybody who's coming to see our shows to feel that way. You walk into Busboys and Poets... and it's welcoming. I want it to feel that way. And for people who might not ordinarily go to a theater to see a play to say, 'Okay, I'll go. It's casual. I can eat. I can interact.' We don't do performances where you have to stay silent the whole time. It's interactive. It's building community. And I feel like that's what theater was meant to be."

To learn more about Young Playwrights' Theater, visit their website at [www.youngplaywrightstheater.org](http://www.youngplaywrightstheater.org).

<sup>1</sup> A blend of poetry, storytelling, music, and dance



# DID YOU KNOW: HOW TO USE A CAREER ASSESSMENT TOOL TO FIND YOUR PATH

By Jeffrey

Have you ever wondered what kind of career fits your personality, skills, and interests? You're not alone! Many people find themselves unsure about which direction to take, and that's where a career assessment tool can help. A career assessment helps you better understand yourself and how your passions can connect to real-world opportunities across different industries. Let's walk through a few key steps to make the most of these tools and guide your future career journey!

## STEP 1. Understand What a Career Assessment is

A career assessment is a structured tool designed to evaluate your interests, skills, personality, and values. It's not a test you can fail, it's a reflection tool that provides insights into what types of work might suit you best. Common examples include the O\*NET Interest Profiler, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Holland Code (RIASEC), and the Strong Interest Inventory.

Each of these tools measures different aspects of who you are. For instance, some focus on what tasks you enjoy, others highlight how you approach problem-solving or interact with others. By completing one or more assessments, you begin to see patterns that reveal your natural preferences and strengths.

## STEP 2. Take the Assessment Honestly

When answering career assessment questions, be authentic! Try not to think about what seems "right" or what others might expect. Instead, focus on what truly energizes or excites you. The more honest your answers, the more accurate your results will be.

For example, if you prefer hands-on, active work, don't select "research and analysis" just because it sounds prestigious. A good career fit should align with your genuine interests and not just external expectations.

Answer the questions with an open mind as well; don't worry about certifications or background experience. This isn't a job application or a test. It's just a tool for you to reflect on how your interests and skills might translate to a career (one that you're passionate about!).

## STEP 3. Review Your Results

Once you complete your assessment, you'll typically receive a report showing your top interest areas or personality traits. Using the Holland Code as an example, your results might show a combination like "Artistic-Social-Investigative." Each category links to different types of careers:

- **Artistic (A):** Creative fields like design, writing, film, or music production
- **Social (S):** Education, counseling, public service, or healthcare
- **Investigative (I):** Science, research, or technology

Take time to read the descriptions thoroughly. Highlight keywords that stand out or careers that immediately spark curiosity.

## STEP 4. Explore Careers That Match Your Profile

Now comes the fun part! Connecting your results to industries that fit you! Use resources like the ONET Online database, MyNextMove.org, or job sites like Indeed to browse careers within your interest areas (you can learn more about online job sites in the Tech Talk column on page 25). Each career profile lists the required education, job outlook, skills, and salary range. For example, if your results suggest strong "Enterprising" interests, you might thrive in business, marketing, or entrepreneurship. This step allows you to see how your personality can fit into multiple paths, helping you think beyond one single "dream job."

## STEP 5. Connect Your Findings to Your Goals

After exploring your results, it's time to reflect. Ask yourself:

- Do these careers align with what I value most (e.g., creativity, stability, helping others)?
- What education or skills would I need to pursue these roles?
- How can I gain experience through volunteering, or classes?

## STEP 6. Reassess as you Grow

Your career interests and goals can change over time and that's okay! Revisit your assessment every few years, especially after major life changes or new experiences. As you gain more knowledge about yourself and the world of work, your ideal career fit may evolve.

Think of a career assessment as a compass, not a map. It won't tell you exactly where to go, but it will always point you in a direction that feels true to who you are.

So, next time you find yourself wondering, "What's my next step?" start with a career assessment. To help you get started, we've included the short version of the O\*NET Interest Profiler below. Feel free to fill it out or use it as a reference! You might be surprised by what you discover about your passions, your potential, and your purpose.

# O\*NET INTEREST PROFILER SHORT FORM



Read the 60 work activities below. Place a check in the box by the activities you would like to do. **Do not** think about how much education/training is needed or how much money you will make! Count the number of checks for each shaded section and write that total in the box to the right of each section. These are your scores for each interest area.

|   |  |                             |
|---|--|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Build kitchen cabinets                               | <input type="checkbox"/> Drive a truck to deliver packages to offices and homes        | <b>Total</b><br><div></div> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lay brick or tile                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Test the quality of parts before shipment                     |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Repair household appliances                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Repair and install locks                                      |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Raise fish in a fish hatchery                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Set up and operate machines to make products                  |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Assemble electronic parts                            | <input type="checkbox"/> Put out forest fires  |                             |
| <b>Realistic checks =</b>   |  |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Develop a new medicine                               | <input type="checkbox"/> Investigate the cause of a fire                               | <b>Total</b><br><div></div> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Study ways to reduce water pollution                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Develop a way to better predict the weather                   |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conduct chemical experiments                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Work in a biology lab   |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Study the movement of planets                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Invent a replacement for sugar                                |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Examine blood samples using a microscope             | <input type="checkbox"/> Do laboratory tests to identify diseases                      |                             |
| <b>Investigative checks =</b>   |  |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Write books or plays                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Paint sets for plays  | <b>Total</b><br><div></div> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Play a musical instrument                            | <input type="checkbox"/> Write scripts for movies or television shows                  |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Compose or arrange music                             | <input type="checkbox"/> Perform jazz or tap dance                                     |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Draw pictures  | <input type="checkbox"/> Sing in a band  |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Create special effects for movies                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Edit movies   |                             |
| <b>Artistic checks =</b>  |  |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teach an individual an exercise routine              | <input type="checkbox"/> Teach children how to play sports                             | <b>Total</b><br><div></div> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Help people with personal or emotional problems      | <input type="checkbox"/> Teach sign language to people who are deaf or hard of hearing |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Give career guidance to people                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Help conduct a group therapy session                          |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Perform rehabilitation therapy                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Take care of children at a day-care center                    |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do volunteer work at a non-profit organization       | <input type="checkbox"/> Teach a high-school class                                     |                             |
| <b>Social checks =</b>  |  |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Buy and sell stocks and bonds                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Negotiate business contracts                                  | <b>Total</b><br><div></div> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Manage a retail store                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Represent a client in a lawsuit                               |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Operate a beauty salon or barber shop                | <input type="checkbox"/> Market a new line of clothing                                 |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Manage a department within a large company           | <input type="checkbox"/> Sell merchandise at a department store                        |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Start your own business                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Manage a clothing store                                       |                             |
| <b>Enterprising checks =</b>  |  |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Develop a spreadsheet using computer software        | <input type="checkbox"/> Calculate the wages of employees                              | <b>Total</b><br><div></div> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Proofread records or forms                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Inventory supplies using a hand-held computer                 |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Install software across computers on a large network | <input type="checkbox"/> Record rent payments  |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Operate a calculator                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Keep inventory records  |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Keep shipping and receiving records                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Stamp, sort, and distribute mail for an organization          |                             |
| <b>Conventional checks =</b>  |  |                             |

In the boxes below, write the names of the interest areas with the three highest scores. The first box is your highest or primary interest. If there are ties, choose the interest with activities that you think are the best fit for you.

1

2

3

## SCORE REPORT- O\*NET Interest Profiler Short Form

**Congratulations on completing your O\*NET Interest Profiler! Interest Areas are a summary of the type of work you like. Now you will Learn about your work interests;**

### Primary (1), Second (2), and Third (3) Interests

Copy below the three Interests from the bottom of your Interest Profiler. Remember the Interest with the highest score (most number of checks) is your Primary Interest.

**Primary Interest: 1** \_\_\_\_\_

**Second Interests: 2** \_\_\_\_\_

**Third Interests: 3** \_\_\_\_\_

**What do your Interests mean?**

### RIASEC Interests

|  |
|--|
| <p><b>Realistic: — practical, hands-on problems and solutions</b></p> <p>People with Realistic interests like work activities that include practical, hands-on problems and answers. They like working with plants and animals, and real-world materials, like wood, tools, and machinery. They enjoy outside work. (Athletic Trainer, Barbers, Civil Engineers)</p>   |
| <p><b>Investigative: — ideas, thinking, and figuring things out</b></p> <p>People with Investigative interests like work that has to do with ideas and thinking rather than physical activity or leading people. They like to search for facts and figure out problems. (Animal Scientists, Biologists, Computer Programmers)</p>  |
| <p><b>Artistic: — creating, designing, and making your own rules</b></p> <p>People with Artistic interests like work that deals with the artistic side of things, such as acting, music, art, and design. They like creativity in their work and work that can be done without following a set of rules. (Architects, Chefs &amp; Head Cooks, Fashion Designers)</p>   |
| <p><b>Social: — helping people, teaching, and talking</b></p> <p>People with Social interests like working with others to help them learn and grow. They like working with people more than working with objects, machines, or information. They like teaching, giving advice, and helping and being of service to people. (Bus Drivers, Coaches, Social Work Teachers)</p>  |
| <p><b>Enterprising: — leading, making decisions, and business</b></p> <p>People with Enterprising interests like work that has to do with starting up and carrying out business projects. These people like taking action rather than thinking about things. They like persuading and leading people, making decisions, and taking risks for profit. (Advertising Sales Agents, Financial managers, Food Service Managers)</p> |
| <p><b>Conventional: — data, detail, and regular routines</b></p> <p>People with Conventional interests like work that follows set procedures and routines. They prefer working with information and paying attention to detail rather than working with ideas. They like working with clear rules and following a strong leader. (Accountants &amp; Auditors, Food Prep Workers, Loan Officers)</p>                            |

# 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": *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood* by Trevor Noah**

In his memoir, South African comedian Trevor Noah shares his personal journey of having been born to a white father and Black mother at a time when such a union was punishable by five years in prison. We follow him through his mischievous childhood and teenage years as he encounters the challenges of growing up in a world of poverty, violence, and abuse, and his loving mother's determination to break the cycle. The book has inspired members in our weekly reentry book club, called "The Build Up," to reflect on the parallels of systemic racism experienced in both South Africa and the United States, as well as the similarities between two governments that do little to protect youth in communities that are denied resources and access to opportunities.



- **Regina: *The Day Tajon Got Shot* by The Teen Writers of Beacon House**

This book is very interesting. It was written by ten teenage girls during the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement using one simple question to examine how it feels to be a human being on all sides. Through their writing, they explore issues of race, violence, loyalty, and justice in a community that is torn apart, but also seeking connection.



- **Julia: *Shark Heart* by Emily Habeck**

I recently read the novel *Shark Heart* by Emily Habeck after a friend recommended it to me. This is a story about a husband and wife, Lewis and Wren, in a world where some people have a genetic disorder where they will transform, at some point in their lives, into an animal. Shortly after their wedding, Lewis is diagnosed with this disorder, and learns that he will gradually turn into a shark. This may sound like a silly premise, but the book was actually a very beautiful, moving look at love, loss, and grieving the life you thought you were going to have, or the life you thought you were going to share with another person.



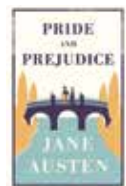
- **Emily: *Project Hail Mary* by Andy Weir**

This is a science fiction novel about a science teacher who wakes up to find himself alone on a spaceship far, far from Earth. He soon comes to find out that he is on a mission to save the planet – and is their last hope, hence the "Hail Mary" (for those who don't know, a Hail Mary colloquially is a last-ditch attempt when all else has failed). The book is very heavy on the science and math related to saving the planet. The author often writes out the equations the main character is working on. However, it is still a quick read and a very charming story about friendship and sacrifice.



- **Grace: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen**

*Pride and Prejudice* is a classic romance novel from the early 18th century by English author Jane Austen. It follows the Bennett family, whose lack of sons and lack of fortune will leave the wife and daughters destitute if their daughters don't marry before the patriarch, Mr. Bennett, dies. When a rich gentleman moves to a nearby estate, Mrs. Bennett begins to meddle in her daughters' affairs. I had only seen and read adaptations and retellings before this, so finally getting around to the original novel was a delight. Jane Austen mixes romance, humor, and social commentary in such an interesting way.



## 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.

**Mr. WeFit: *Invasion of the Suga Monster*** by Joe Houston Jr. with illustrations by Saba Sardar

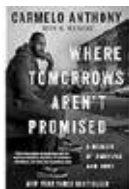
**Description provided by the author:** When Planet Ward 8 is under attack, one hero steps up – powered by fitness! The kids of Planet Ward 8 are laughing, playing, and growing strong... until the sky fills with sticky pink clouds and a new threat appears – the giant, donut-covered Suga Monster! Just when it seems too sweet to be true (and too dangerous to handle), Mr. WeFit returns! With every workout – running, jumping, push-ups, and squats – he and the kids discover that strength, teamwork, and healthy habits are the real superpowers.

This action-packed and inspiring story teaches kids how movement, confidence, and smart choices can defeat even the biggest challenges – one healthy move at a time. Perfect for ages 5-9, *Mr. WeFit: Invasion of the Suga Monster* mixes superhero fun, colorful adventure, and wellness lessons that make fitness feel exciting and heroic.



# 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?**

**AHA:** I can relate. You realize some things can be taken away easily in your environment, so you don't dream that big, like getting to the NBA, NFL, or etc. You just live in the moment and survive by letting things play out. At one point in my life, I was really good at football. But I did not get lost in a dream nor dream that I'll reach the top, which made me not take it as seriously as I could've.

**RA:** I can relate. One dream of mine is to become good at cooking. However, I fear I'll mess up something and people will speak badly about my dishes.

**MH:** I can't relate to this question because I never had hopes or dreams like he did.

**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?**

**CM:** My Grandfather passed when I was 4 years old. His name is James S. If only he were around, I know I could fellowship more and learn more knowledge on Islam or holy beliefs and life.

**MH:** The images of his father were that he thought he was the Malcolm X for Latinos. I was able to meet all of my older family members before they passed on.

**RA:** There was no one I knew of that I heard stories about. Carmelo had memories of his dad having a big and caring heart, and being a brave person who fought and stood on what's right for his people.

**AHA:** Carmelo had a positive image of his father being loved by many, who was an activist always there for his people and community in every way he could. My grandfather on my father's

side was someone I heard a lot of stories about and only got to know him through the stories. I think if I got to experience time with him in person, we would have been very close since I feel like most of the things I like and enjoy come from him. I heard he was into a lot of similar things.

**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?**

**RA:** She exposed them to art, museums, professional wrestling matches, movies, and picnics. For myself, I was introduced to playing African drums. I played at the Kennedy Center often, Taste of DC, the Folklife Festival, and other places. I went to summer camp, hiking, fishing, and picking vegetables at farms. I went with programs and not with my family.

**AHA:** She did a host of things from working two jobs, working at a school and bank amongst other things, while always hosting and entertaining others. She would expose her kids to art, museums and other adventurous places outside of the neighborhoods they resided in. As a child, I remember going on a lot of field trips so some places stuck out like the Air and Space Museum and other museums in D.C., which made me love history as I grew. I always wanted to learn about new things I wasn't exposed to.

**CM:** Carmelo's mother, Mary, worked to take care of her family. Prospect Park, Coney Island, Highland Park, or Central Park were some places they'd go. Schools that I went to and Northwest Washington DC are places I'd go.

**MH:** His mother always worked two jobs. She took them to picnics, wrestling matches, museums, church, and Coney Island.

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

**AHA:** Carmelo felt like an outsider at first since his name was different and unique. Many always said it wrong or as a joke. He knew nobody by that name and the meaning behind it did not



add up to what he envisioned everyday. Once his mom explained to him the significance of it, he learned to accept it. My name was what I represented as a servant to Allah to uphold my life by.

**CM:** Carmelo Anthony says he didn't feel like he was a part of any paradise and he was a lost kid tossed into a sea of strangers in a new school, so he came up with a new name version of himself and it's Tyrone Johnson.

**MH:** He didn't like his name because he felt like nobody could say it the right way and he felt like it wasn't a good name for a black kid. Me, I love my name.

**RA:** He felt his name didn't fit him. It's from Italian and Hebrew origin, and the meaning is orchard garden. I never liked my name, especially my last name. My mother was married to my two older brothers' father and mad at my father, so we took on his name. I'm going to change it because it has no value to me.

**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?**

**MH:** I believe it's because there's always something happening, which doesn't allow you to fully heal from one issue before another one hits you. I think the results are forever hurt and pain.

**RA:** In our communities, we're not taught to speak about certain things. We're closed off for fear of being vulnerable. I think that the parents in our community should speak about pain and healing much more. I think we should focus more on mental health instead of teaching things from a masculine point of view. I think that we should teach young men at an early age how to express themselves and still feel like they're not "soft".

**CM:** The feeling of no hope or faith, and normalizing a life is difficult in a struggle when going through a lot of good or bad. As time grows and the support of one's health, belief, and love, caregiving builds overall.

**AHA:** I believe at times you become numb towards it not trying to think about it, which then becomes buried inside you. As you grow this pain emerges leaving some filled with trauma or other affects due to not healing from these past events you wanted to block out. In the end, the result is you'll have to heal from it. Talk to someone, and let go of it through healing.

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



Demolition of the RFK stadium on East Capitol St NE



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## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: ANIMAL KINGDOM

*By Julia*

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Shoutout to FM member MC who suggested this topic a while back! For this next issue, we want to turn our attention to other inhabitants of Planet Earth, and think about our relationships to the animals of the world. Did you have a beloved pet growing up? (One of the members of our book club at the DC Jail regaled us recently with tales of the cat he had growing up that he swears could talk!) Do you have a special connection with the birds, or other wildlife that you might see around you? Even if you aren't in an environment where you can interact with nature, think about the pets you'd like to have in the future, or the animals you'd love to see in your future travels. Do you want to see condors (giant birds!) soaring through the mountains in South America? Do you dream of seeing lions in the wild in Africa? Or tigers roaming free in Southeast Asia? Do you wish you could see a dodo (a flightless bird from the island of Mauritius that sadly went extinct in the 1600s), or a northern white rhinoceros (a critically endangered species that scientists are working hard to protect)? Is there an animal that you feel a personal connection to, or one that embodies your spirit in some way? Like one time in the Free Minds office, we asked each other "if you were an animal, what animal would you be?" This can be a fun way to reflect on yourself, or get to know others around you. Whatever you want to share, we'd love to hear from you.

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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