

January/February/March 2026
Vol. 15, Issue 1

Free Minds Connect



ANIMAL KINGDOM

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PETS FOR LOVING HOMES**

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SAVING PANDAS FROM EXTINCTION

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ANNOUNCEMENT: NEW FREE MINDS MAILING ADDRESS INSIDE!

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Greetings Free Minds Metazoa!* (*My high school biology teacher would be impressed* 😊)

I hope you are well and have been able to experience some moments of tail-wagging happiness and purring contentment since our last issue. If not, I suggest starting with the Free Minds staff pets gallery on page 39. I predict it will be hard to suppress a smile! In these challenging times, more and more people are turning to the comfort of animals for emotional support. That's the case with FM member Delonta, who just came home after 18 years; his new pooch Ice is helping him navigate reentry (page 6). And you can read about Carlos and his canine companion Enzo's friendship story on page 14.

Even more animals are having their own comfort pets! I just finished watching the latest video of the viral sensation Punch the Japanese macaque monkey thanks to Julia's recommendation. He was abandoned by his mother at birth so his zookeepers gave him a stuffed orangutan from the IKEA store. Millions of viewers worldwide watch as the little monkey interacts with and clutches the stuffed animal after he was shunned by the other monkeys in his troop. He's now integrating with his troop and learning and growing every day.



Punch the Monkey with his stuffed animal

You'll read about how residents of Arlington County Detention Facility in Virginia are able to interact with dogs in person through the nonprofit People Animals Love (PAL). They bring dogs to hospitals, nursing homes and other places for emotional support (page 34). I wish all of you could have a visit from PAL, but until then you can read about AJ on page 9. He has been able to take part in a training program at his state prison for rescued dogs. AJ writes, *"There's not much I could do to pay amends and restitution to my hometown for the harm that I caused. But what I am able to do is take in rescued pups that are found abandoned, abused, or neglected."* AJ shows the dogs love and care that he was not able to receive growing up.

Did you know that watching fish in an aquarium or being around water can cause a "Blue Mind" effect, a calm and meditative state that reduces stress hormones? Might be best to get fish from a pet store though instead of a fair like IK experienced on page 8. 😊 And the best news is that if you can't be near water, you can induce a similar relaxed state

through meditation or listening to rain or ocean sounds. You can find Kelli's serene meditation on the Serengeti on page 29.

I'm going to leave you with some photos good friends of mine took on their trip of a lifetime to Africa.



Animals in the Maasai Mara reserve in Kenya.
Thank you FM friend Pete for the photos!

And we have a very important announcement: **FREE MINDS HAS A NEW MAILING ADDRESS!** Our lease is up at our current office so we are moving to another office space nearby. To ensure more consistent and reliable mail delivery, we opened a PO Box (harking back to the early days of Free Minds when we started out with a PO Box as many of you may remember!). So please save this new address and write to us at our PO Box from now on! **ALSO NOTE IT IS A NEW ZIP CODE TOO!**

Free Minds Book Club
P.O. Box 73618
Washington, DC 20056

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*

**Metazoa is the biological classification (or subkingdom) that encompasses all animals, which are defined as multicellular, eukaryotic (nucleus with DNA and mitochondria) organisms, which includes humans*

Next Issue's Theme: Generations

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!)

FREE MINDS HAS A NEW MAILING ADDRESS!

Free Minds Book Club
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FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Kelli

Free Minds Hosts Holiday Free Write

In mid-December, 32 Free Minds members gathered with staff and volunteers at the Free Minds office for a special Holiday Free Write. Free Write is a monthly gathering at the office where Reentry Book Club members can work on personal writings and enjoy a delicious meal together. The evening was filled with connection and joyful reunions between members who hadn't seen one another in years. Guests enjoyed a meal from Henry's Soul Café, including baked chicken, turkey wings, mashed potatoes, mac and cheese, green beans, cornbread, and sparkling apple cider. Then everyone received gift bags filled with candies, pens, journals, bookmarks, and – you guessed it – books! With music playing softly, the room settled into focused writing. Members who shared poems were met with enthusiastic snaps and applause. The cozy space felt alive with belonging, a beautiful way to celebrate the year's end.

Former NBA Players Visit Youth Services Center

On December 4, Free Minds welcomed former NBA and Washington Wizards players Javaris Crittenton and Etan Thomas to the Youth Services Center for a candid conversation with members of Free Minds teen book club, about choices, accountability, and redemption. Crittenton spoke about the 2009 locker room incident with Gilbert Arenas that ended his NBA career and was later featured in the Netflix documentary *Untold: Shooting Guards*. He reflected on how quickly pride and unchecked emotion can escalate conflict, with consequences far beyond a single moment. He also shared that he later served nearly a decade in prison on an unrelated charge and now emphasizes thinking ahead and walking away from unnecessary conflict. Thomas, a published poet and longtime Free Minds supporter, reinforced the importance of surrounding yourself with people who encourage wise decisions. He described writing as a powerful outlet for processing frustration. Several youths shared their own poetry, earning warm applause. The visit ended with a message of hope: our hardest chapters do not have to define us. Youth gathered for photos and autographs, reminded that their stories are still being written.

Free Minds Goes to College

In January, Free Minds brought our outreach program On the Same Page to American University. Reentry Coach Jen, who is also an Adjunct Professor at AU, teaches a course on the consequences of mass incarceration. Poet Ambassadors Delonta and James, along with staff members Sofia and Regina, visited Jen's class to share their work and lived experiences. Regina, who writes as "Eclectic Beauty," opened with an original poem and read a moving piece by a member who remains incarcerated—a reminder that voices from inside the walls reach far beyond them. Delonta shared that he was charged as an adult at 16, lifting his pant leg to reveal the ankle monitor he still wears on supervised release. One student later reflected that digital monitoring can feel like an extension of imprisonment. Both Delonta and James spoke about how reading and writing gave them a voice when they felt silenced. James left students with a challenge: "You all have a golden opportunity to change, just like I did." Free Minds family, your words matter. Your stories are being heard in places you may not yet imagine!



In Loving Memory

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

Rest in Power:

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

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.

DA: I received the Carmelo Anthony book and the Free Minds *Connect* booklet on Empathy and Compassion. They both were great reads and very informative. Plus, I enjoyed viewing pictures of Washington, DC considering that I have been away since April 2008... I just wanted to say "Thanks" for blessing Free Minds members behind the wall with information with respect to employment opportunities upon release. Free Minds is dope! (lol) I am so happy to be a part of this movement that you guys have. Plus, I enjoy writing. I also enjoyed FM member Ashley's article on page 12 of the *Passion Connect*. His story gave me some great ideas that I would like to implement upon release.

JM: I really like that you all are including laws that are being introduced in the House of Representatives that are relevant to FM members and the youth of DC. Hopefully, y'all will update us if relevant laws affecting us do ultimately get passed. While reading the names of the FM team, I became really impressed by how much FM has expanded. New positions. So many new people. As a juvenile, I only met Kelli, Keela, Tara, and maybe Julia.

HH: There are certain articles that struck a chord with me. The "Conversations" by Carlos, his story about helping the homeless man, is one. The "Real World of Work" article about Delando also recalled a lot to my memory. I like the path that Delando walks, and the love he has for the youth. What touched me the most was the "Meditation." The guidance into practicing empathy helped me today. There are times that I struggle with putting myself into other people's shoes, especially those who I feel are against me. What this meditation helped me with was understanding that people are going through their own issues that I'm not aware of. Things that could affect how they're relating to me. With empathy comes understanding.

AL: I just received my Free Minds *Connect* in the mail, and you would not believe how surprised I was to find your (Keela) beautiful poem on compassion and empathy. Ms. Tara was right; your words are fire! As always, I thank you for the Reentry Corner information, because it opens my eyes to what opportunities awaits me upon my release... However, if I am honest with myself, the job that Delando has (youth shelter) is truly one of my dream jobs because it allows me to engage in one of my passions: helping others, because someone/some people (in my case) took the time to help me. Plus, it gives me the chance to display the compassionate empathy I have developed over the course of my 22 years of incarceration.

CP: I read the Michelle Obama book that's called *The Light We Carry*. It starts off talking about her life growing up as a child with her dad. She also talked about different events for her books. The way she wrote it was very inspirational. *The Light We Carry* is very motivational because she shares her life on what to do and what not to do. The inner light that I have is positivity and I share that with people by teaching them how to stay positive at all times.

CS: The first poem me and a cellmate of mine did together was in the SMU program with nothing to do but get creative. That poem meant a lot to us both because it was both of our first time ever trying to write a poem. But what made it such a big deal was that it made the Free Minds *Connect*. It made us feel important.

EB: As I was reading Michelle Obama's book, in chapter 1 I was reminded of my Granny who used to knit all day. Chapter 2 *Decoding Fear* helped me to see that fear can only keep me from seeing my true ability to be the real me. Chapter 3 made me think of my favorite movie, *A Thin Line Between Love and Hate*, which made me feel I could smile to know that I'm loved. So yeah the book was good and helpful.

QUOTE-I-VATOR

"If only we can overcome cruelty, to human and animal, with love and compassion we shall stand at the threshold of a new era in human moral and spiritual evolution - and realize, at last, our most unique quality: humanity."



Jane Goodall

- Jane Goodall, British ethologist known for her groundbreaking research on wild chimpanzees and her lifelong dedication to conservation and animal welfare

"An animal's eyes have the power to speak a great language." - Martin Buber, Austrian-Israeli philosopher

"If any animal is capable of unconditional love, it is surely the canine: they are forgiving, caring, life-affirming creatures who humble us and teach us to be more human and compassionate." - Richard Belzer, American actor and comedian

"Closeness to animals creates the desire to understand them, and not just a little piece of them, but the whole animal. It makes us wonder what goes on in their heads even though we fully realize that the answer can only be approximated." - Frans de Waal, Dutch-American primatologist and ethologist

"By loving and understanding animals, perhaps we humans shall come to understand each other." - Louis J. Camuti, American veterinarian and author best known for being the first veterinarian to devote his practice solely to feline medicine

"My goal in life is to be the kind of person my dog thinks I am." - Paul Dunn, Co-founder of B1G1 Business for Good, a global initiative that empowers businesses to integrate giving into their daily operations

FAMILY TIES

By Isaiah

For this issue's Family Ties article, I had the chance to interview our Free Minds member, Delonta. He's on a mission to make himself and his family proud now that he is home. Additionally, he's enjoying time with his best friend, Ice, an American bulldog. This article follows Delonta 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?

Delonta: I've been home for six months now. I've been going to different programs and trying to find work as well as participating in different outreach events with Free Minds.

Isaiah: When did you come home?

Delonta: I came home on August 8, 2025 after 18 years.

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

Delonta: My family threw me a welcome home party. Everybody came out! We enjoyed ourselves and ate good. They had a big ole celebration for me. I had a background with my name on it. It was a nice background. It was a surprise party! I didn't know anything about it.

Isaiah: It was a surprise party! What was their game plan to get you there without you knowing?

Delonta: My wife. I just came home, but I knew my sister lived on a certain street. I just didn't know where because I was locked up for 18 years. My wife said, "We have to go to my friend's house off the street." I'm thinking we are going to a friend's house and we're going to go chill with them. The whole time, we pulled into the garage at my sister's house. When we opened the garage, everybody was there, saying, "Surprise" and "Welcome Home!"

Isaiah: What was your relationship like with your family before your incarceration?

Delonta: My relationship with my family before I got incarcerated was good. I was just hard-headed. I got into trouble a lot. My family always supported me. I just made some stupid decisions all the time since I was a juvenile. It caused me to get charged as an adult and sent to prison at a young age, and even though I was in it, they still supported me.

Isaiah: You mentioned you were incarcerated for 18 years.

Delonta: Yes

Isaiah: How did you stay connected with your family while you were incarcerated?

Delonta: Phone calls, emails, visits, pictures, money, and things of that nature. They always supported me. My whole 18 years of incarceration, my family always made sure I was good. Some people can't say that. My family was like Free Minds. There

weren't any days off when it came to me; they always made sure I was good.

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

Delonta: If you can't talk to them on the phone, just send them letters. Explain to them how you feel and what you're going through. Tell them "I'm going through things, but at the end of the day, I need my family because without family, I'm really lost in here." Your family really is your motivation for getting home.

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

Delonta: I would tell people on the outside who have people who are incarcerated that I know life on the outside is still life, and you still have to pay bills. But at the end of the day, for a person who's incarcerated, if you just take like 5 or 10 minutes out of your day, whether it's to send them a letter, pictures, or a money order, that would mean a lot to them. They will feel appreciated and loved. They will know you are thinking about them. When people write to you from prison and tell you what's going on, don't judge them. Listen to them because prison is really messed up in there, and people are really going through some things in there. So, hear them out and just uplift them in the best way you can, which is in a positive way.

Isaiah: Our theme for this *Connect* magazine issue is Animal Kingdom. Do you have any pets or animals of your own?

Delonta: I own an American bulldog. He is a puppy and his name is Ice. I got him like three weeks ago and he's 12-weeks-old. Ice is my emotional support right now because he makes me feel good. He's really a good dog. He's my best friend.

Isaiah: If you could be any animal, what would you be?

Delonta: I'd like to be an eagle. They can just get up and fly whenever they want.

Isaiah: What have you done with your family since you've been home?

Delonta: They still support me. Since I've been home, they've been taking me out, helping me out financially, and getting me rides to where I need to be. I really love my family because they've been there for me even when I was doing wrong. Things I did in the streets I did not have to do. I just did it because when I went outside, that was what I saw, and I thought that was the right thing to do. My family is everything to me. That's why, this time, I'm going to make them proud of me. I'm not just going to do it for them, but for myself too, because I'm tired of letting my family down.

Isaiah: I want to tell you that your Free Minds Family is proud of you. We're rooting for you. Thank you so much, Delonta, for doing this interview!

BAM BOOK BALLOT

Alright Free Minds readers, get your voting pencils ready because it is time to choose the next Books Across the Miles book! Please write to us with your top 3 choices from the list below.

1		<p><i>On the Come Up</i> by Angie Thomas [Young Adult]</p> <p>Sixteen-year-old Bri wants to be one of the greatest rappers of all time. As the daughter of an underground hip hop legend who died right before he hit big, Bri's got massive shoes to fill. But it's hard to get your come up when you're labeled a hoodlum at school, and your fridge at home is empty after your mom loses her job. So Bri pours her anger and frustration into her first song, which goes viral for all the wrong reasons. Bri soon finds herself at the center of a controversy, portrayed by the media as more menace than MC. But with an eviction notice staring her family down, Bri is determined to make it. Even if it means becoming the very thing the public has made her out to be.</p>
2		<p><i>The Water Dancer</i> by Ta-Nehisi Coates [Historical Fiction]</p> <p>When young enslaved Hiram Walker's mother is sold, he finds himself gifted with a mysterious power. Years later, when he almost drowns, this power saves his life. In escaping death, Hiram becomes determined to escape from the only home he has ever known. Thus begins Hiram's journey from a Virginia plantation, to guerrilla cells in the wilderness, to the Deep South, and ultimately up North. As he becomes entangled in an underground war between slavers and the enslaved, Hiram never stops seeking to rescue the family he left behind.</p>
3		<p><i>There There</i> by Tommy Orange [Fiction]</p> <p>Tommy Orange's novel follows 12 Native American characters traveling to California to attend the Big Oakland Powwow. Among them is Jacquie Red Feather who is newly sober and trying to reunite with her family. Fourteen-year-old Orvil is coming to perform a traditional dance for the very first time. Meanwhile Dene Oxendene is grappling with the loss of his uncle, whom the powwow is in honor of his memory. This chorus of voices tells of the plight of the urban Native American—grappling with a complex and painful history, with an inheritance of beauty and spirituality, with communion and sacrifice and heroism.</p>
4		<p><i>Lucky Me: A Memoir of Changing the Odds</i> by Rich Paul [Memoir]</p> <p>When Rich Paul was twenty-one-years old, he was selling sports jerseys out of his car. One day he meets a high school basketball player named LeBron James, and the two soon develop a friendship that spans decades and reinvents the business of sports forever. Readers follow the story of a young Rich Paul narrated by the Paul of today, who looks back with wit and insight, drawing out the lessons he learned at every stage—about business, people, and the values that lead to success.</p>
5		<p><i>Colored Television</i> by Danzy Senna [Fiction]</p> <p>After spending time bouncing between rentals and sublets, Jane and her family finally find a luxurious spot while house-sitting in the hills above Los Angeles. Taking time off from work during a sabbatical, Jane now has time to finish her second novel. When her plans don't work out as she had imagined, Jane is desperate for a plan B. Then she meets Hampton Ford, an attractive producer with a large-scale development deal at a streaming network, who seems excited to work with her. Together, they begin to develop "the Jackie Robinson of biracial comedies." Things finally seem to be going right for Jane—until they go terribly wrong.</p>
6		<p><i>The Monsters We Defy</i> by Leslye Penelope [Fantasy]</p> <p>It's Washington, DC, 1925. Clara Johnson has the gift of talking to spirits, which is a power that has come in handy at her darkest moments. Now, it has become a curse that has left her in debt to the spirit world. When a powerful spirit gives her the opportunity to gain her freedom, Clara seizes the chance. To do so, she must steal a magical ring from the richest woman in DC. Clara comes to rely on an unlikely team to help her gain her freedom, including a handsome jazz musician and an aging actor. As they race along DC's legendary Black Broadway, conflict in the spirit world begins to mix with the human one—which could cost Clara her life and change DC forever.</p>

First Choice _____

Second Choice _____

Third Choice _____

MEMBERS CONNECT: ANIMAL KINGDOM

I'm Not an Animal By MC

I wish that I could submit a piece detailing a special bond that I had with a family pet during my childhood, or maybe my connection to nature and various wildlife...or maybe my "spirit animals" which I've embraced while incarcerated...but instead I must speak what's on my heart. I'M NOT AN ANIMAL!

That's what they call us, ANIMALS. To get a conviction, how we're treated by the guards, sometimes how we're even treated by our own family, friends, and community.

I could dive deeper into this matter, I should, but I won't. The Lord knows there's many different layers to this issue...Instead I'd like to leave the people with a quote in hopes of challenging one's worth, identity, and value. This quote was pulled from an op-ed by criminologist John DiLulio that was published in 1995, when he coined the term "superpredator", showing how we have been dehumanized:

"...The buzz of impulsive violence, the vacant stares and smiles, and the remorseless eyes... They quite literally have no concept of the future... they place zero value on the lives of their victims, whom they reflexively dehumanize... capable of committing for the most trivial reasons... for as long as their youthful energies hold out, they will do what comes 'naturally': murder, rape, assault, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, and get high."

Short-Long Story By ML

I was sitting on a bench in the park watching my dog play with two other dogs and a beautiful woman sat behind me and stated, "How's your day? Is this seat taken?" I said, "No."

She said, "Are you taken?"

I said, "No, are you taken?"

"No!" she responded.

"What made you stop here and sit?" I asked.

She stated, "I seen you alone and thought you needed company. Was I correct?"

"Not really, just taking my dog to get some fresh air due to the weather being so nice today. And you?" I replied.

"Same here, I just don't have a dog. Which one is yours?" she asked.

I called my dog, Dane, and he looked up from the play

area and came running over towards us. He stopped and sat down and looked at the beautiful woman who sat next to me, whose name I did not know.

I asked her, "If you don't mind me asking, what is your name again? My name is M, and yours?"

"Amber!" she stated.

"Well, Dane, this is Amber. Amber, this is Dane." I said, introducing my dog and the beautiful woman.

Dane put his paw and Amber took it in her hand, and Dane ran back to play. I asked Amber if she wanted to get ice cream with me and she agreed. I got Dane and we left.

Long story short, after a few weeks, me and Amber started dating, which lasted years. She ended up being my wife!

Animals By IK

If I were an animal I would be either a dolphin for my caring personality or maybe a jaguar for maybe the sneaky side of me. The artist Victoria Monét named her studio album Jaguar. I loved it. I did an animal exhibit in elementary school and I chose a jaguar. It was fun making it. When I start traveling I want to go to the Netherlands to see highland cows. They are so cute. My mother loves dolphins. When I was younger she had a stuffed dolphin animal. I liked the Madagascar movies growing up. Gloria the hippo was my favorite character and the giraffe was very sweet but lost sometimes haha.

In elementary school one of my favorite memories was going to the Norfolk Zoo in Virginia. It was fun going to the petting zoo section, also going to the Baltimore Aquarium. Sharks are so scary but it was cool looking at them swim in rotation and the dolphin show. I loved sitting in the splash zone. Dolphins are cute.

Some pets I've had in the past were fish I won at the fair, but they would die.

When I live on my own I would want to own a dog, specifically a golden retriever or the female long-haired dog from *The Lady and Tramp*.

MEMBERS CONNECT: ANIMAL KINGDOM

The Animal Kingdom By DS

The animal kingdom is one big harmonious community, reflecting the awesome power of Allah's creation. From the smallest animals, like bees and birds, to the largest, like gorillas and rhinos, every member of the community plays a role in supporting the entire kingdom.

What's crazy is that a lot of the animals probably don't know the important part they play or even that some of their neighbors exist. For an ant, his world is so concentrated and small, there's no way he can comprehend the existence of the elephant. Yet his role in the ecosystem is so important he instinctively knows what he must do to maintain this environment where the elephant lives.

The same goes for the elephant. There's no way he can comprehend the ant's world. How can he even know the ant exists? But like the ant, his existence is critical to the whole

animal kingdom, including the life of the ant.

It's a lot like the community I will enter when I am released. Every member of society has an important role to play. Whether it is a small part or a big one, it is integral to everyone's survival.

Humans are connected to both animals in the wild and to our household pets because they are both, by their nature, family oriented and provide for their loved ones. Whether it's animals in the wild, nurturing, feeding, and protecting our homes and providing comfort to human companions, there are many similarities between humans and animals. As humans, we have a responsibility to let animals live their lives in harmony with us because we are all Allah's creatures. He created them to live among us and we must respect that.

Protecting My Little Homies By AJ

I was a very anger-driven man before my imprisonment. My difficult childhood brought me a lot of pain in my emotions. Drinking excessively to ease the pain, shame, and depression was common for me everyday. Because of this, I made wrong decisions and caused much harm to my hometown. After committing crimes, I was apprehended and eventually sentenced to an astounding amount of time. But a miracle happened briefly after my arrival to the prison. I began to read and study the Bible daily. My heart changed so the callousness was abating. The warped mindset disappeared and I no longer clung on to bitterness, resentment, and unforgiveness. And I discovered purpose in life.

When the dog training program began here two years ago, I joined it. There's not much I could do to pay amends and restitution to my hometown for the harm that I caused. But what I am able to do is take in rescued pups that are found abandoned, abused, or neglected. Many of the puppies we receive are from my hometown. I love the sweet loving pups that come in, which I call my little homies. It's a joy for me to protect my little homies from my hometown that don't have a home.



Above: One of the puppies AJ trained wearing a cape that he made.

Below: Artwork by FM Member AJ



POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

The Butterfly in the Wind

by PD

In the quiet of a chilly Saturday evening
A butterfly with orange and blue wings
rose in the lantern light and whispered to the wind
"Watch"

With a flutter soft as clean linen
it traced circles of stars in the air
Showing the wind how to dance
without losing interest

The wind tried to follow stumbling over the English
Boxwoods
until the butterfly laughed like a hyena
"Not like that, " it said. "Try again."

So together they moved through the sky,
one small, one endless,
learning that even the oddest ones
can teach the leaves to be gentle
And ever since that day, the wind has carried a hint of
the spring breeze
a memory of the butterfly who taught it how to soar

The Butterfly in the Wind

by IK

In the quiet of shady groves
a butterfly with glitter wings rose into the green light
and whispered to the wind, "watch."
with a flutter as soft as cotton
it traced circles of diamonds in the air,
showing the wind how to dance without losing motion.
The wind tried to flow stumbling over clouds
until the butterfly laughed like a child.
"Not like that," it said. "Try again."
So together they moved through the sky
one small one endless
learning that even the smallest ones can teach the
biggest to be gentle.
And ever since that day, the wind has carried a hint of glitter
a memory of the butterfly who taught it how to dance
and jitter.

Dog

by ML

Can't wait 'til my master gets home to feed me,
and take me for a walk.
It's so boring in this house without him.
All I do is sit in this cage all day.
I wonder if he knows how I feel at the time.
I get so happy when I hear his car pull into the driveway.
I know he hears my loud barks!

The Lion

by DS

Majestic and royal,
protecting the pride,
he knows what to do,
instinct is his guide.
Mighty and fierce,
no other compares.
He's always on point,
and keenly aware.
I hold my head high
with nothing to fear.
Allah's by my side.
The next chapter is here.
Stronger and stronger
day after day,
like a lion I will triumph
nothing can stand in my way.

I see it now, my path is clear.
I have a responsibility of my own.
My city, my community, my loved ones
They're all relying on me.
Like the King of the Jungle,
I'm ready to spring into action
and be the man Allah created me to be.

The Lion's Responsibility and Power

by AHA

It rules with a sense of pride and strength
like no other
watching over its kingdom protecting its turf.

Leaving no hints as to when it will attack if tested.
A power unmatched and strength like no other.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

I Am A Bird

by AG

I view myself as a bird
I wake early, sip coffee
and depend on God for my Provisions.
Find me a work, then I'm off to Freedom
I soar through the sky,
without blinking an eye, I fly
thinking about my Lady Bird in my nest
I got to feed her and love her
I adore her, my white dove.
I'm her brown nest
as she lays on my chest.
It's going to get better.
Confidence I feel when I'm with you,
this stuff sad I'm away from you!
My sky is no longer blue.
Can you fly to me?
I'm stuck in the trees of New Jersey.

Sparrow

by JS

I watch you from my cell window on lockdowns,
after the geese have picked open the trash
you wait your turn for the scraps,
sometimes bread is what you eat,
but I believe you like worms the best.
On these mornings where the rain forces them to the surface,
you feast.

And I watch as you take the broken trays, twigs, and
pieces of plastic
to a place where you can rest your wings,
things nobody wants,
things nobody thinks they need.

I would love to be a lion or gorilla,
but when I think,
a sparrow may be closer to me,
for I've found meaning and purpose from this broken thing,
this place that wishes to break me,
this place that has ironically shaped me,
where in my life I've been told emboldened into a lion
or gorilla in the jungle,
since watching the sparrow,
I've grown the wings to escape and fly away.

The Butterfly in the Wind

by CP

In the quiet of the night,
a butterfly with iridescent wings
rose into the moon light
and whispered to the wind, "Watch."

With a flutter as soft as cotton,
it traced circles of star dust in the air,
showing the wind how to dance
without losing itself in the still of the night.

The wind tried to follow,
stumbling over the treetops,
until the butterfly laughed like a child at play.
"Not like that," it said. "Try again."

So together they moved through the sky,
one small, one endless,
learning that even the small
can teach the enormous to be gentle.
And ever since that day,
the wind has carried a hint of star dust,
a memory of the butterfly
who taught it how to dance and be free.



Lions in the Maasai Mara reserve in Kenya, named for the Maasai people, the indigenous people from that region. Photo by FM Friend Pete

TECH TALK: FUN AND USEFUL APPS TO CHECK OUT WHEN YOU'RE HOME

By Emily

Hi, everyone! Welcome back to the tech column. Normally, we strive to bring you all a tech column that somehow relates to the theme of the *Connect*. With this edition's theme being *Animal Kingdom*, it was a bit of a toughy! What follows is a mix of animal and non-animal related interesting and useful phone apps and other fun internet features that you may find useful when you come home. As always, we welcome your ideas - please write to us with any tech questions that we can answer in a future column.

USEFUL APPS (ANIMAL-RELATED)

Petsitting

Are you considering getting a pet when you come home? If so, you might also need someone to take care of your pet from time to time. Luckily, there are plenty of apps that connect pet owners to people that are available to watch or walk their animals. From the pet owner side, you just need to download the app. Then, depending on which app you choose, you can either look through profiles of pet sitters and message one of them, or on other apps you create a profile for your pet and then sitters or walkers will message you.

Alternatively, these apps also allow people to sign up to use them to become a dog walker or pet sitter. From some brief research, it looks like most of these apps require a background check, but do not have stated policies on what might disqualify someone from being allowed to use the app as a pet sitter.

Animal ID

Have you ever heard of an app that can listen to a song playing on the radio and identify it for you? Now imagine that, but for plants and animals. There is a free app called Seek by iNaturalist that uses image recognition technology to identify plants, animals, and fungi. All you need to do is use the app to take a photo of the animal or plant that you are trying to identify. I will include a disclaimer that I have not used this app myself and that user reviews say it does better for plants than animals. However, it is free and seems like something that might be fun to play around with, if you can get the animal you are trying to identify to stay still long enough to snap a photo!

USEFUL APPS (NON-ANIMAL RELATED)

Maps

When you buy a phone, it will come pre-populated with a few apps. One of them is a map app. iPhones come with Apple

Maps preloaded, and most Androids come with Google Maps preloaded. Both of these apps are extremely useful. You can use them to get directions from point A to point B, either driving, walking, biking, or using public transportation. You can also look up businesses and find their opening hours, their websites, reviews, and other information about them. When you are in the directions feature, the app will also tell you if there is traffic ahead or if there is construction, police activity, or an object in the road.

Weather

Your phone will also come with a weather app already installed. These apps have many features, but the ones I use most regularly are checking the temperature, whether there is any precipitation predicted for the day, and whether it will be sunny/cloudy etc. The app will also tell you when sunrise and sunset are, the highs and lows for the day, the air quality rating, and the UV level, among other things.

FUN! (ANIMAL-RELATED)

While we were brainstorming for this edition of the *Connect*, a member of the Free Minds team mentioned that you can watch live-streams of many different types of animals. A live-stream is a video that is being recorded and uploaded to a website in real time. This means that you can watch the video as it is happening. YouTube, a video sharing website, has many of these types of videos. For example, I was able to watch a herd of zebras stop by for a drink at a watering hole in Namibia, a country in Southern Africa. Then, I clicked on another video and was able to watch a panda playing with her cub at an animal refuge in China. It may sound silly, but these are endlessly entertaining!



A live-stream of deer eating at a feeding trough in Maine in the northeastern US.

DC PHOTOS *By Rebecca*

As requested by our readers



Carroll Avenue in Takoma Park After a Snowstorm



Mosaic Mural Across From Takoma Metro Station



A Bus Stuck in the Snow at Vermont & U Street NW

continued on page 18

Have a request for the next issue's DC Photos? Write us at Free Minds Book Club, P.O. Box 73618, Washington, DC 20056 and let us know what you'd like to see!

CONVERSACIONES DE MENTES LIBRES

Por Carlos

Saludos mi gente. Son mis grandes deseos que al leer este artículo se encuentren con la mejor salud, fuerte mental y físicamente, y que estén mentalmente libres sin importar esas paredes. Para los que están con nosotros por primera vez, pasé 25 años en prisión. Este Abril cumplirá 6 años de haber recibido alivio en las Corte bajo la ley de IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act). Fui deportado a mi país natal y bueno, aquí estoy con ustedes.

Como ya saben, la revista del *Connect* siempre tiene un tema. El tema para esta edición es Reino Animal. Les comento primero que me encantan los animales. Creo que ese encanto creció más estando preso, ya que no tenía la libertad de disfrutar de ellos. Pero les voy a contar de mi mascota. Porque caí preso a una edad joven (a los 17 años), nunca tuve la oportunidad de tener mascotas. Los apartamentos donde crecí no permitían tener mascotas entonces nunca tuve esa oportunidad. Cuando estaba preso, siempre pensaba en tener un perro y me hice la promesa de conseguir uno cuando me den la libertad.

En 2024 tuve la oportunidad de obtener uno. Se llama Enzo. Un pitbull mixto con otra raza(s). Es mi primer mascota y he aprendido mucho, no solo de él sino de mi también. Aprendí que inteligente son. Solo tenía un mes cuando lo compré, así que se me hizo fácil enseñarle unos cuantos trucos. Como es mi primer perro, vi muchos videos en YouTube para aprender más de mi mascota. En estos videos aprendí que los perros son animales que se llevan en manadas y que ven a sus amos como parte de una manada y mucho de lo que hacen se relata a eso. Por ejemplo, cada vez que como, él se me acerca para que le de lo que estoy comiendo. No porque tiene hambre, sino porque en su naturaleza de comer con su manada. Así que ahora, cada vez que como le doy un poco siempre.

Los perros son muy sociables, son excepcionalmente hábiles para detectar y reaccionar a las emociones humanas. Debido a su alta inteligencia emocional y, en muchos casos, a un fuerte deseo de complacer a sus dueños, pueden percibir cambios sutiles en el olor, el lenguaje corporal y el tono de voz para comprender si estás feliz, triste, enojado o asustado.

¿Cómo perciben los sentimientos los pitbulls (y otros perros)? Sensibilidad olfativa (olfato): Los perros pueden oler los cambios químicos en el sudor y el aliento humanos que ocurren durante diferentes estados emocionales, como la adrenalina liberada durante el miedo o el cortisol producido por el estrés. Lectura del lenguaje corporal: Son expertos en observar la postura, el movimiento y las expresiones faciales para evaluar el estado de ánimo. Tonos vocales: Pueden distinguir entre tonos vocales positivos y negativos, a menudo haciendo coincidir la emoción con la expresión facial. ¿Cómo reaccionan típicamente los pitbulls a las emociones que están leyendo? Tristeza/angustia: Cuando sienten tristeza o ansiedad, muchos pitbulls intentarán ofrecerte consuelo, como traer un juguete, apoyarse en ti, descansar la cabeza en tu regazo o usar una "terapia de presión profunda" (recostarse sobre ti) para calmarte. Miedo/ira: Si sienten miedo o estrés extremo, pueden volverse protectores, o pueden volverse callados, tímidos o esconderse si sienten que la tensión es insegura. Felicidad: Cuando sienten alegría, a menudo reaccionan con un comportamiento juguetón, moviendo la cola y entusiasmados.

Como vivo solo, mi perro es muy apegado a mí. Donde sea que esté, él también quiere estar allí. Y cuando tengo que salir, aulla porque lo estoy dejando. La primera vez que lo hizo, me partió el corazón. No sabía porque se ponía así. Ahora, cada vez que tengo que salir, le tengo que dar una charla para que no se ponga triste. También se ha acostumbrado a mi horario. Me levanto temprano y él ya sabe que al despertar, lo sacaré afuera para caminar y hacer sus obras. También solo le hablo en inglés, todos los mandamientos que le doy son en inglés. Tengo que decirles que al mismo tiempo, yo me he apegado mucho a él y se ha convertido en parte de mi y es como mi terapia. Creo que fue una de las mejores decisiones que he tomado. Porque ahorro ya no hablo solo, siento que mi amiguito me entiende. Su nombre completo es Enzo el Terrible, tal vez les cuento de qué terrible es en verdad. Pero hasta entonces, díganos, ¿tienes historias de mascotas o tu amor por los animales? Puedes escribir un poema acerca de animales .

FREE MINDS CONVERSATIONS

By Carlos

Greetings everyone. It is my sincere wish that as you read this article you are in the best of health, strong both mentally and physically, and that you are mentally free, regardless of those walls. For those of you joining us for the first time, I spent 25 years in prison. This April will mark six years since I received relief in court under the IRAA law (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act). I was deported to my native country, and well, here I am with you.

As you know, the *Connect* magazine always has a theme. The theme for this edition is the Animal Kingdom. First, I should mention that I love animals. I think that love grew even more while I was in prison, since I didn't have the freedom to enjoy them. But I'm going to tell you about my pet. Because I was imprisoned at a young age (17 years old), I never had the opportunity to have pets. The apartments where I grew up didn't allow pets, so I never had that chance. When I was in prison, I always thought about having a dog, and I promised myself I would get one when I was released.

In 2024, I had the opportunity to get one. His name is Enzo. He's a pit bull mix with other breeds. He's my first pet, and I've learned so much, not only from him but about myself as well. I learned how intelligent dogs are. He was only a month old when I got him, so it was easy to teach him a few tricks. Since he's my first dog, I watched a lot of YouTube videos to learn more about him. In these videos, I learned that dogs are pack animals and that they see their owners as part of a pack, and much of what they do relates to that. For example, every time I eat, he comes up to me so I'll give him some of what I'm eating. Not because he's hungry, but because it's in their nature to eat with their pack. So now, every time I eat, I always give him a little.

Dogs are highly sociable and exceptionally skilled at detecting and reacting to human emotions. Due to their high emotional intelligence and, in many cases, a strong desire to please their owners, they can perceive subtle changes in scent, body language, and tone of voice to understand if you are happy, sad, angry, or scared. How do pit bulls (and other dogs) perceive feelings? Olfactory sensitivity (sense of smell): Dogs can smell the chemical changes in human sweat and breath that occur during different emotional states, such as the adrenaline released during fear or the cortisol produced by stress. Reading body language: They are experts at observing posture, movement, and facial expressions to

assess mood. Vocal tones: They can distinguish between positive and negative vocal tones, often matching the emotion to the facial expression. How do pitbulls typically react to the emotions they are reading? Sadness/Distress: When they feel sadness or anxiety, many pit bulls will try to comfort you, such as bringing a toy, leaning against you, resting their head in your lap, or using "deep pressure therapy" (lying on top of you) to soothe you. Fear/Anger: If they feel fear or extreme stress, they may become protective, or they may become quiet, shy, or hide if they feel unsafe. Happiness: When they feel joy, they often react with playful, wagging tails and enthusiasm.

Since I live alone, my dog is very attached to me. Wherever I am, he wants to be there too. And when I have to leave the house, he howls because I'm leaving him. The first time he did that, it broke my heart. I didn't know why he was acting like that. Now, every time I have to go out, I have to talk to him so he doesn't get too sad. He's also gotten used to my schedule. I get up early, and he already knows that when I wake up, I'll take him outside for a walk and to do his business. I also only speak to him in English; all the commands I give him are in English. I have to tell you that at the same time, I've become very attached to him, and he's become a part of me; he's like my therapy. I think it was one of the best decisions I've ever made. Because now I don't talk to myself anymore LOL, I feel like my little friend understands me. His full name is Enzo the Terrible, and perhaps I'll tell you just how terrible he really is. But until then, tell us, do you have any pet stories or stories about your love for animals? You can even write a poem about animals.



Enzo the Terrible as a puppy and today

Some of Wes' puppies lounging in their bed last July



REENTRY PROFILE: WES'S ANIMAL KINGDOM

By Haven

For this Connect issue, I had the opportunity to interview Wes, a Free Minds member who has interacted with animals since he was a kid. We talked about how now, almost two years after coming home, he has continued to foster that connection in his daily life.

Haven: To start off, can you tell me a little bit about who you are and how you discovered Free Minds?

Wes: I started out in the streets, and I got some time. I thought my life was over. And then I was with one of my roommates and he was telling me about Free Minds, and I started writing poems. I had never written a poem before, so my first poems made me look within myself and find me, because I had never tapped into other parts of me. Free Minds made it their business to make sure that they remembered my birthday and make sure I had material to read and stuff to do. Then a lawyer came and turned my life around. And here I am. April 5th of this year will be two years of me being home from prison. I'm still in Free Minds and I'm still with the family, because Free Minds is my family.

Haven: I'm really glad to hear that. As you know, the theme for this Connect is Animal Kingdom. In what ways do you feel like you are connected to the animal kingdom?

Wes: I'm connected to the Animal Kingdom because I love pets, I love animals. I've raised my puppies, I raise my dogs. I birth my puppies for families and loving homes, so I make family animals. I didn't raise fighting dogs, but my dogs are naturally instinctive and protective. Once you have one, they're gonna love you and protect you, and as long as you're good to them, they'll be good to you.

Haven: What inspired your love for dogs, and how did you get into raising them?

Wes: I've always loved dogs. My first dog was a Lab-Pitbull mix, and I got her at six months. I think the joy of it for me is watching my dogs grow up and their personalities. My first dog, she showed me everything, like what unconditional love was. We couldn't keep her in our neighborhood anymore because we had to move. I had never had a dog since then. But when I came home, one of my buddies that I met helped me get a job, and he had this puppy. Eventually, she came to me and I raised her. I'm telling you, from my soul, I needed her. After all of this, she was my therapy. She was my peace. She was my love. The way she loves me and how she is with me, I can't even explain it. When I get home and talk to her, she smiles and her tail starts wagging.

Haven: I also heard that you're a big fan of fishing! How did you get involved with fishing in your life?

Wes: Fishing maniac! I actually started out as a kid. My first fishing rod was a can with some line and a hook and a sinker on it. That was when I was nine, and I've been fishing ever since. I started out chasing bass fish, like smallmouth, largemouth, you name it. Now I just chase everything with a fishing rod. I've been fishing since I was nine years old, so you can imagine while I was in prison, all I had were fishing magazines, hunting, *Field & Stream*. And the first thing I did when I got home, my brother gave me two fishing rods: a 12 foot fishing rod and a 16 foot fishing rod. I haven't stopped fishing since. When I came home, I went to the James River Pier in Virginia and I caught a baby shark. I didn't have a phone or anything, but I had a good time.

Haven: Do you have any advice or tips for people who might want to get more involved with the animal kingdom?

Wes: My advice for them is to give a dog a chance. A dog teaches people lessons, and a dog is just like watching a child grow up and get their personalities. That's what you get when you raise a puppy. I think that my advice is anybody if you're going to get a pet, a dog or any kind of animal, learn that animal, and take care of that animal. You have to be consistent with them, with the lessons, the

teachings, the responsibility of housebreaking them, and all of that. You have to pay attention and watch how you feed them and take care of them. That's my advice, to just take care of your pet. Learn your animal, and just nourish them and nurture them. You can't help it, you're going to fall in love.

Haven: That's really sweet and great advice! For my final question, is there anything you'd want to tell Free Minds members about the animal kingdom?

Wes: For me, having my dogs is therapeutic. You know, they save me. So when I go through my depression and I go through my stress, my female dog, the mother of my dogs, she knows. It's therapy for any of us just getting home. You just have to be responsible because it's not cheap to take care of a dog. So anybody that needs help, just come and get a puppy from me. I got one for them.

Haven: Thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview!

Wes: I'll do anything for it for the family, so it's my pleasure. Thank you for taking time out to talk to me.

CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- ★ AD, LV, TB graduated from the Free Minds Credit Builders Program.
- ★ DK and FJ passed the written and driving test for their forklift license.
- ★ DH passed his learner's permit test.
- ★ DR graduated from a construction training program.
- ★ EM, FL TA were accepted into the DC Central Kitchen Culinary Job Training program.
- ★ EG was named employee of the month at his job.
- ★ JH, KB, LW and TH got a new apartment.
- ★ JS completed his CPR training.
- ★ LS passed the road test and received his driver's license.
- ★ MP completed the Leadership and Restaurant Institute Program.
- ★ MZ completed his GED.
- ★ RP graduated with a degree from Ashland University.
- ★ RL just celebrated his 5th anniversary.
- ★ SM performed in a poetry event.
- ★ SH completed his supervised release and TP got off probation early.

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!

DC PHOTOS *By Rebecca*

As requested by our readers



Temporary Ben's Chili Bowl Pop Up Location on U Street NW



Ben's Chili Bowl Original U Street NW Location
Currently Under Construction



Takoma Station Restaurant on 4th Street NW

DC PHOTOS *By Rebecca*

As requested by our readers



Brookland Metro Station

Have a request for the next issue's DC Photos? Write us at Free Minds Book Club, P.O. Box 73618, Washington, DC 20056 and let us know what you'd like to see!

REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hey Family, Happy Black History Month!

Thought that I would start out with a bang and a reminder since lately it feels like Black History Month isn't as visible as it was when I was in school and we will not discuss when that was LOL! As always I consider it a privilege to be in touch with you again and as usual, we have a very interesting theme; I hope you think so as well. When I think of the term "Animal Kingdom," I envision nature at its most electrifying! Highly productive and engaging because animals are always on their grind. They know if they don't go out and get it, it won't get done, and that is why I chose one animal, well insect, in particular to bring up in this article: the ant.

Ants are like that, and although I gave them more shine than humans earlier, I actually want to take some time to list out their similarities to humans to bring some balance and show that humans aren't so bad after all.

- **Protective** – Ants defend their homes from intruders just as humans would in the same situation. Ants do not play; they may be tiny but they do not back down when it comes to them and theirs.
- **Unique** – Although ants are all the same species, they exist in lots of different shapes and sizes much like humans do! One thing we can all agree on as humans is the more unique the more interesting!
- **Special Skills** – Ants specialise in lots of different skills such as foraging, fighting, and building. Humans are very similar to this as we all have various passions as well as jobs and responsibilities that keep life exhilarating.
- **Daily Grind** – It is said that ants work all day, every day. This could also be said for some humans, although I hope that most of us get weekends off and I highly doubt that ants do! I got mad respect for their work ethic. They get ready for the winter in the summer when most of us are lounging on the beach (although I respect their work ethic, I'd rather be chilling on the beach).
- **Unstoppable** – The ants' way of surviving in so many various climates and habitats is said to be because they can modify the environment to fit their needs, (which we can do with central heating!) they find and use resources (which we do by going out and shopping for it!), and defend themselves.

- **Are You Talking To Me?** – Ants can communicate by using sound. They don't exactly create this sound in the same way that we do, but it can still be related to us as they have the ability to communicate!
- **Royalty** – In an ants' nest there will be a queen ant. Although the only royal entity that they have are queens, this is my favorite human trait since almost all humans in my opinion are royalty and should be treated as such. When I look around I see all Kings and Queens!

I hope that I have done the ant some justice and the next time you see one, instead of just seeing some very small inconsequential and sometimes bothersome little squiggly things on the ground, you will see an unstoppable army on a mission and on their grind!

Now, onto some resources fit for royalty!

The Georgetown Paralegal Program

509 7th Street NW

Washington DC 20004

202-934-0121

prisonsandjustice@georgetown.edu

The MORCA-Georgetown Paralegal Program prepares returning citizens for successful careers in the field of law. The program is a partnership between Georgetown, the Mayor's Office on Returning Citizen Affairs (MORCA) and the DC Department of Employment Services (DOES).

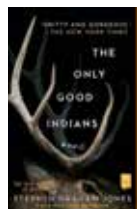
Participating Paralegal Fellows complete an intensive 24-week certificate program through the Georgetown University Law Center, and they earn an hourly stipend while completing classes full time. The curriculum includes legal research and writing, corporate law, torts, contracts, legal technology, ethics, digital literacy, job readiness, and more. After completing their academic coursework, Fellows explore opportunities for full-time legal support positions and receive employment support.

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

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

with Neely

Thank you to everyone who cast a vote for our next Books Across the Miles selection! I am excited to share that our next book will be *The Only Good Indians* by Stephen Graham Jones. This novel follows the lives of four Native American men and their families, all haunted by a disturbing, deadly event that took place in their youth. Years later, they find themselves tracked by an entity bent on revenge, totally helpless as the culture and traditions they left behind catch up to them in a violent and vengeful way. We are so eager to hear all of your thoughts!



1. Many Native American tribes regard elk with deep respect, believing them to be symbols of strength and protection. Some tribes even place elk as teachers in stories told through oral tradition, while other tribes consider elk to be protectors of women. What do you think is the significance of elk in this book? Are there any animals or other creatures that serve as a symbol of protection and strength to you?

2. Throughout the book, Jones bounces back and forth between **third person point of view** (when the narrator exists outside of the story, and refers to a character as "she," "he," or "they") and **second person point of view** (when the narrator treats the reader as if they are involved in the story, and refers to the reader as "you"). For example, the character of the Elk Head Woman is often read from a second person point of view. What impact did it have on you to read parts of the story from Elk Head Woman's perspective? Did it change how you understood the story? Have you ever wished you could see from another person's perspective? If so, who was it and why?

3. What do you think the book's title, "The Only Good Indians," refers to? How is this title, which refers to a historical phrase rooted in hatred and racism towards Native Americans, explored throughout the book?

4. This novel explores themes of identity and heritage, with Gabe, Cass, Ricky, and Lewis often reflecting on their ties to the reservation they grew up on alongside society's expectations of what it means to be Native American. Are there any stereotypes society has of where you come from, positive or negative? Do they impact your day-to-day life? If so, how do you handle that?

5. Victor Yellow Tail wants Nathan to participate in the sweat lodge ceremony as a way to motivate his son to take pride in his Native American heritage at a time when Nathan was on a path to self-destruction. Is there a tradition or other form of lore where you are from that you wish you could share with youth who are struggling to encourage them to be proud and confident in both themselves and where they are from?

5. At the end of the book, Denorah chooses to end the generational cycle of violence that the characters in the book have experienced by shielding Elk Head Woman from being shot. What do you think of this ending? Has there ever been a time in your life where you made a difficult choice to end a harmful cycle? What impact did that have?

Remember to vote for our next book in the book ballot on page 7!

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: GENERATIONS (VOLUME 15, ISSUE 2)

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on **Generations**. We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 15, Issue 3 will be exploring the theme of **Imagination**.

(1)

Write a poem about generational differences. In what ways do they contribute to a diverse and vibrant society? How have they showed up in your own life? Next, write a poem about the world that future generations are going to inherit. What hopes and dreams do you have for them?

(2)

What role do you think media, including music, literature, and film play in shaping the particular outlook of a generation? Write a poem about the influences that shaped your generation.

(3)

Write a poem about learning across generations. How do young people learn from older generations, and older generations learn from younger people?

(4)

What would it be like to learn from our ancestors, or what have you learned from them? Write a short story or poem about a young person that goes on a journey to learn about their family's history, making profound discoveries and connections along the way.

(5)

Create an acrostic poem about what carrying on a legacy over time means to you using the word generations.
To construct the poem, write a word or phrase that begins with each consecutive letter of the word.

G _____
E _____
N _____
E _____
R _____
A _____
T _____
I _____
O _____
N _____
S _____

(6)

Write a short story where a grandparent and grandchild magically (or technologically) swap bodies for a week.
The grandchild must navigate the physical and social challenges of aging, and the grandparent experiences the tremendous pressures of navigating the modern world.

REAL WORLD OF WORK: JOHNISHA'S MANY HATS

By Jennifer

When I was an audience member at the Georgetown Pivot Program's annual Pitch Competition last summer, I was struck by Johnisha's compelling and polished pitch to the business leader judges. It was no surprise then that the judges awarded her the 1st place honor, along with seed money for her Art-o-Mobile mobile art studio that brings creative programming and trauma-informed therapy directly to children in their neighborhoods.

But when I called Johnisha on a busy Saturday during her lunchbreak, I learned that it's not just during pitch competitions when she speaks with such passion and positivity. Instead, Johnisha is always feeding a loop of focus, gratitude, and hope. Here are some highlights of our inspiring discussion.

Jennifer: Thanks for taking the time to chat with me today, Johnisha! I've lost track of all the MANY hats you wear, including mom, grandma, full-time employee, artist, non-profit CEO, writer, poet, advocate, student, etc. Which hat are you wearing right now?

Johnisha: I am currently working as a leasing agent for a building management company, where I lease apartments to renters looking to live in one of 16 buildings in Northwest DC, mostly in Dupont Circle, Adams Morgan, and Tenleytown. I just gave an 11am tour to a prospective client and my next tour will be at 1pm.

Jennifer: Okay, so how do you like wo- (before I could even finish my question, I received this enthusiastic information from Johnisha) 😊

- It's the best job I ever had
- I want to retire and grow old with it
- The company has a "people first" mission, which I share
- The company appreciates diversity - look, they hired me with my background!
- Also, many of our maintenance technicians have been incarcerated
- My colleagues are wonderful to work with
- We have team trainings and holiday parties, which are fun!
- Upper management values my ideas - like when they decided to incorporate my pitch to celebrate the seniors who have lived in our buildings for 30 or more years
- There is tuition remission for my 6-month certified leasing professional program
- We get allowances for our cell phone and car, since we drive our own vehicles to the properties
- If we get excellent reviews by "Secret Shoppers" (actors who are paid to pretend to be renters and then report back to the bosses) we get bonuses
- There are lots of other financial incentives, like if you rent a long-empty apartment or if you refer someone for a job who gets hired
- I feel like my own boss - with opportunities to earn commission on top of my regular salary

Jennifer: WOW! It sounds like a win/win for both you and the company. How did you land this ideal position?

Johnisha: It's actually a crazy full-circle story... There's a 3-month internship component after the 6-month classroom programming at Pivot. When the companies came to recruit us, I met Peter from the company and loved the way he described his company. After



we spoke for quite some time, he shared that he's only hiring for maintenance techs, but said if he were hiring leasing agents, he'd definitely give me the job because of my strong interview - and smile! I was disappointed, but appreciated my internship with the Responsible Business Initiative for Justice.

Then, right before graduation, one of my Georgetown professors told me that the company was advertising for a leasing agent so I applied right away. I was thrilled when I reunited with Peter during the interview, smiled, and reminded him of his promise that he'd hire me if they ever had a leasing position - and they did!

I started on June 30, 2025.

Jennifer: What's a typical day?

Johnisha: Although I work as a multi-site leasing associate, we all start at the main administrative office at 8am every weekday for a couple of hours. There are 4 of us covering 16 of the company's 52 residential properties. They also have commercial spaces.

The tours start at 10am and I work one Saturday per month. I fill my schedule up so I can do 6 tours per day, which makes the day go by quickly. Whenever they're looking for people to take on extra shifts, I always sign up.

If I don't have a tour scheduled, I do property walk-throughs to check on the vacant units. I also make videos of the unit to post on a real estate platform.

Jennifer: What's your favorite part?

Johnisha: I like helping the prospects find homes they are excited about. Since people are always looking for apartments in this area, I can just follow up on the "hot leads" so I don't have to make cold calls. I search the units I have vacant that match their property interests. It's stressful looking for a new place to live. I've been homeless and obviously that was very stressful. But you don't have to have been homeless to know that figuring out where you want to live, what you can afford, and what your life in that neighborhood

continued on page 27



JUST LAW: COMPASSIONATE RELEASE IN FEDERAL COURTS: CRITERIA, TRENDS, AND KEY DECISIONS

By Tim

What Is Compassionate Release?

Compassionate release is a legal mechanism that allows federal prisoners to seek early release or a reduced sentence due to “extraordinary and compelling reasons.” The process is governed by 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A), which authorizes federal courts to reduce a term of imprisonment if certain conditions are met. The law is designed as a safety valve for rare situations where continued incarceration would be unjust, such as severe medical decline, advanced age, family emergencies, or significant changes in law.

Legal Framework

Historically, only the Director of the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) could file a compassionate release motion. This changed with the First Step Act of 2018, which now allows incarcerated individuals (or their attorneys) to file directly with the sentencing court after either exhausting administrative remedies or waiting 30 days from a request to the warden. This reform dramatically increased the number of compassionate release motions considered and granted by federal courts.

Federal Criteria for Compassionate Release

Federal courts and the BOP follow criteria set out in the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines (USSG § 1B1.13) and BOP Program Statement 5050.50. The main categories are:

1. Medical Circumstances

- Terminal illness (end-of-life trajectory)
- Serious medical conditions that substantially diminish the ability to care for oneself in prison
- Deteriorating health due to aging

2. Age-Related Factors

- Prisoners aged 65 or older
- Serious deterioration in health due to age
- Must have served at least 10 years or 75% of their sentence

3. Family Circumstances

- Death or incapacitation of the primary caregiver for a minor child
- Incapacitation of a spouse or partner when the prisoner is the only available caregiver

4. Other Extraordinary and Compelling Reasons

- Victim of severe abuse in custody
- Unusually long sentences combined with non-retroactive changes in law
- Any other reason the BOP or court deems extraordinary and compelling.

The Judicial Process

A compassionate release motion can be filed by the BOP or directly by the prisoner after the First Step Act. The court must find:

Extraordinary and compelling reasons exist.

- The 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a) sentencing factors support release (e.g., public safety, nature of the offense, rehabilitation).
- The reduction is consistent with U.S. Sentencing Commission policy statements.
- Judges have broad discretion and may grant release even if the BOP denies or fails to respond within 30 days. Rehabilitation alone is not enough, but it can be considered alongside other factors.

Recent Trends and Data

The number of compassionate release motions increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic but has since stabilized. In fiscal year 2025, about 14.5% of motions were granted, with success rates varying widely by district. The most common reasons for granting release include rehabilitation, changes in law leading to disproportionately long sentences, serious health conditions, terminal illness, and family emergencies.

The top reason for denial is that the § 3553(a) factors (such as public safety) outweigh the reasons for release.

Notable Federal Court Decisions

Federal courts have issued a range of decisions interpreting the scope of compassionate release:

United States v. Morris (2020): Compassionate release granted due to advanced age and health risks from COVID-19.

United States v. Greene (2021): Release granted to a 72-year-old with serious medical conditions and strong evidence of rehabilitation. (Note: I attended the funeral of Green about six months after his release.)

The Supreme Court is currently considering the limits of what constitutes "extraordinary and compelling" reasons, including whether fairness or innocence-type concerns can justify release. See *Fernandez v. United States*. The issue is whether a combination of "extraordinary and compelling reasons" that may warrant a discretionary sentence reduction under 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A) can include reasons that may also be alleged as grounds for vacatur of a sentence under 28 U.S.C. § 2255. (The decision should be forthcoming before the end of this term).

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

Application Process

You (or a representative) submit a request to the prison warden.

If denied or no response in 30 days, you may file a motion with the sentencing court.

The court reviews the motion, considers the § 3553(a) factors, and decides whether to grant release.

Conclusion

Compassionate release is a vital, though rarely granted, remedy in the federal system. It reflects the justice system's recognition that rigid sentences may become unjust due to unforeseen changes in a prisoner's health, family situation, or the law itself. The First Step Act has made this relief more accessible, but courts continue to apply strict criteria to ensure that public safety and the interests of justice are preserved.

In the next issue, we will review compassionate release for DC Code Offenders, which has a different application process, and some differences to the eligibility criteria as well.

REAL WORLD OF WORK *continued from page 25*

will be like can be really challenging. I really enjoy making this process easier and even enjoyable for the people I work with.

Recently, one of my prospects gave me a little plant after I helped her find her apartment. It was a small token that meant a lot to me.

Jennifer: Would you consider living in one of the apartments?

Johnisha: Yes! I'd love to. And I'd get a 20% discount on rent as an employee! But I am currently working on rebuilding my credit and can't yet afford the rent.

Jennifer: How is your organization The Royal Impact and its Art-O-Mobile doing after winning the Pitch?

Johnisha: Great! I was nervous during the pitch since my classmates were really smart and had really strong business ideas. I was so happy to learn that people believed in my ideas and felt proud to win first place.

With the prize money I got a website, business cards, art materials, and car magnets. I've been bringing the programming to kids as young as 3 years old to help them access arts and support their mental health. For example we start with an ice breaker and healing circle to discuss something that made them upset or uncomfortable, address it using cognitive behavioral therapy, then make an art piece - with paint, beads, singing, journaling, etc.- based on what we talked about. Then we come back to the circle to share and process. I believe that art is healing so I want to help the children experience this restoration.

Jennifer: We can't forget to talk about your family!

Johnisha: My daughter has been attending Morgan State University on a singing scholarship and will graduate in May. She has been singing all over the world - just came back from Italy! And once she graduates, she will continue to bring her beautiful voice to other countries through her new job as a singer on an international cruise. I am also very proud of my son who is a supervisor at a rental company and great father to my grandson who is about to turn 1 in March.

Jennifer: What advice do you have for members preparing to come home?

Johnisha: Be like Nike - just do it! There's always something to do on the inside. Everything I brought home, I built when I was in. For example, I learned how to speak Spanish in prison so I can speak with my clients. I hadn't painted before prison, but I took an acrylics class and fell in love. I thought I was just passing time while I was incarcerated, but I was building my skills. Everyone has a hustle in prison - channel that energy into positive things. I hustled my paints and I made cups to sell. You have to be grateful. I don't have much yet, but the little I have I am grateful for and I build on that. Lastly, I look out for people and it comes back to me in positive ways.



THE WRITE WAY: MAGICAL REALISM IN WRITING

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

By Ruby

The late William Blake once wrote that, "To the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself." When we look at nature through creative eyes and see possibilities for incorporating magical elements into our writing, we begin to enter the realm of magical realism. Magical realism is an immersive genre of literature that has fantastical components interspersed throughout the real world. While the foundational world remains the same, there are normalized elements of magic that may originate from folklore, myths, or one's own imagination. It differs from fantasy because the story is ultimately still rooted in reality and frequently deals with real world issues, such as poverty, colonization, and familial struggles. Although it did not originate in this part of the world, Latin American authors have been credited with contributing a significant amount to the growth and development of magical realism as a genre. Famous examples include *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende, *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel, and countless others. A common trope in many works of magical realism, though not a necessary one, is animals with anthropomorphic (having human characteristics) qualities. You might find yourself running into a wise hare akin to the White Rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland* or a group of crocodiles who have a treaty with a local human tribe. Like other aspects of magical realism, this bizarre factor of the narrative is normalized in the world of your creation. Throughout this article, we'll explore several tips and tricks for imbuing your writing with a little bit of wonder.

TIP #1: LET YOUR IMAGINATION RUN WILD

In the world of magical realism, fantastical is the name of the game! Although it is important to ground the foundation of the story in the real world, the magic you incorporate into your story can be anything from one's destiny being determined by the kind of flower that sprouts from the top of their head on their 18th birthday, to humans being friends with gerbils who run medicine shops. Don't be afraid to lean into the most unique, peculiar, and outlandish things that your mind can conjure—the sky is the limit! An important aspect of this magic is that it must be normalized. Therefore, don't go into gratuitous (extra, unnecessary) detail explaining why sheep regularly float during harvest periods—it's just part of the mundane (ordinary) for the people in your story. However, remember that the magic you include must have some sort of grounding in the rest of your story that ultimately lends itself to the lesson you're trying to teach your readers. What do the magical elements do to illustrate the human condition? How can they better help us understand the world around us? As said by writer Sandro Piedrahita, "In a successful work of magical realism, the supernatural must illuminate the ordinary" ("How to Write a Work of Magical Realism").

TIP #2: BE INSPIRED BY THE REAL WORLD

All the aforementioned authors who wrote pieces that became famous for their excellent display of magical realism pulled from aspects of the real world to provide the framework for their stories. Many of us know the saying that truth is stranger than fiction, and this can be a great source of inspiration for your story. In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the story utilizes magical realism to depict the historical transition of India from being colonized by the British to gaining independence. While including real aspects of these historical events, Rushdie tells a tale about children who gained powers when they were born at the time of India's independence. *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende details the story of the Trueba family dealing with post-colonial and political conflicts alongside supernatural elements in Latin America. The beauty of history is that there's a wealth of it to be inspired by in this regard. If you're not sure where to start, consider researching a specific location and seeing if there's any era or event that seems especially compelling to you. You could even consider writing a more contemporary story with magical realism where you write about more recent happenings in the world that serve as a source of inspiration.

TIP #3: IF IT WALKS LIKE A DUCK AND QUACKS LIKE A DUCK...

I know that I'm not the only one who looks at animals and imagines what their inner dialogue is like, or even what their voice would sound like if they had one. To me, my cat sounds like a little boy asking, "Can we play now? Toys? Then maybe we can have a Churu? Please? I know I knocked over your Raisin Bran, but it's because I needed you to play!" As writer Yi Shun Lai says in an article about how to write animals that talk, it's important to determine what each animal's unique voice would be ("From the Front Lines: Writing Compelling Animals Who Talk"). Depending on what you want for your specific portrayal, you can either stay true to "character" with a voice that matches the personality of the animal – an intelligent octopus, an arrogant rooster, a clever cat – or you could think outside the box and write outside of how we *think* we know them. For example, we generally think of bunnies as more gentle and quiet, but what if the bunny in your story is plotting world domination? When writing about our animal friends, the world is your oyster—don't be afraid to think outside the shell!

Remember that these tips are meant to point you in the right direction, not be strict guidelines that you must adhere to. Each story, poem, and essay is what you make of it. We would love to know about how you incorporate magic realism and animals into your writing. Have fun, and don't forget to live in the magic!

MEDITATION: THE ANIMALS OF THE SERENGETI

By Kelli

Hello Free Minds!

You may recall my sharing the story of tracking bison, eagles, wolves, and even a grizzly bear in Yellowstone National Park last summer. That experience was proof to me of how thrilling the animal kingdom truly is. Alongside my list of national parks and countries I hope to visit, I keep an unofficial bucket list of animals I want to witness in the wild. At the very top of that list is the whale. I promise you, one day I'm going to see that whale!

As we often experience when we gather with Free Minds members in person (at the DC Jail, Correctional Treatment Facility, and Youth Services Center), meditation is a kind of quiet magic. It allows us to travel beyond our immediate surroundings and experience places our bodies may not be able to go... at least not right now.

So if we are going to explore the animal kingdom together, let's allow our minds to journey somewhere **extraordinary**!

Let's travel to the vast grasslands of the Serengeti, in the country of Tanzania, where the horizon appears endless and each sunrise reveals a world alive with movement, strength, and possibility. Though I haven't been to Africa (yet!) I have heard travelers to the Serengeti describe the expansive horizons with golden grass stretching as far as the eye can see. One remarkable ability of the human mind is that we can visit places without ever leaving where we are.

So put on your safari gear and let's go!

Begin by taking a slow breath in... and releasing it gently. Again, breathe in... and breathe out.

Let your shoulders drop. Unclench your jaw. Allow the muscles in your face to soften...

Now imagine the early morning on the wide plains of the Serengeti. The sun is just beginning to rise. The air is cool and fresh. A soft golden light spills across the tall grasses, and the world feels calm, spacious, and new.

Take a slow breath... and place yourself there.

In the distance, we hear the wind moving through the tall grasses, birds calling softly to one another, and somewhere nearby the low rumble of an elephant traveling across the plains. You squint and then you see him as he moves steadily through the grass. Notice his unhurried pace. He is grounded, calm. Each step is powerful, yet nothing about the elephant feels rushed. He trusts the earth beneath his feet.

The elephant shows us that steadiness is a form of strength. No matter how uncertain life may feel, you can meet each moment one step at a time. You don't have to solve everything today. It is enough to keep moving forward.

Take a breath and feel the support that is beneath you right now.

Nearby, a giraffe lifts its head above the scattered trees. From that height, it can see for miles. Sometimes when we are very close to our problems, they can feel enormous. But perspective changes things. What feels overwhelming today may look different with time.

The giraffe reminds us that our lives are larger than this moment, or any single chapter. There is more ahead than you can see from here.

Breathe in... and imagine your own view widening.

Not far away stands a small group of zebras, their stripes glowing softly in the morning light. No two patterns are alike. Even though each one is entirely unique, they remain together, alert and connected.

The zebra survives through community. As human beings, we too are meant for connection. Whether it comes through a conversation, a shared laugh, a letter, a book club, or simply being understood, we touch one another's lives in ways we may not always realize. We are part of something larger...

So remember this:

You matter. Your presence matters.

Now, resting in the tall grass, you notice a lion. It is not chasing anything. Not proving anything. The lion is calm in its own power.

The lion does not question its worth... just like you do not have to question yours. There is a strength within you that no past mistake can erase. A dignity that remains untouched. Like the lion, you do not need to prove your worth to possess it.

Let yourself rest in that knowledge for a moment.

Take a deeper breath in... and release it slowly.

As you stand in this vast landscape, you recognize all its beauty that you have within yourself: the elephant's steadiness; the giraffe's perspective; the zebra's connection; and the lion's quiet strength. These qualities already live within you...

Each one of us is still growing. Still learning. Still becoming.

Take one final slow breath as you prepare to leave (for now) your new friends in the animal kingdom of the Serengeti.

When you are ready, gently open your eyes... But remember this:

You are an essential part of this big, beautiful world.



IN THE NEWS

By John, FM Friend & Rebecca, FM Staff

DEEP DIVE: UPDATES ON DC BILLS IN CONGRESS

As we reported last fall, several bills that both threaten DC's ability to govern itself and make changes to DC's criminal legal system have been introduced by Congressional Republicans. The legislative process is always in motion, but as of the writing of this article, an additional two such bills have passed the House since our last report, making a total of nine of these bills that have passed the House and are waiting on a vote by the Senate. Seven other bills have been introduced to the House but have yet to be voted on by the Representatives. For a bill to become a law, it must pass in both the House and the Senate and be signed by the President. **So far, none of these bills have fulfilled those three requirements, meaning none of these bills have become law.** Below is a rundown of the bills that would impact DC laws and are currently making their way through the legislative process:

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

- H.R. 5214: increases pre-trial detention and requires cash bail for a range of alleged offenses.
- H.R. 5107: repeals DC's Comprehensive Policing and Justice Reform Amendment Act of 2022.
- H.R. 4922: restricts DC's power over criminal sentencing laws and lowers the maximum age for the YRA to age 18.
- H.R. 5140: lowers the age at which a minor may be tried as an adult for certain criminal offenses to 14 years of age.
- H.R. 5125: abolishes the DC Judicial Nomination Commission and grants the president sole authority to nominate DC judges.
- H.R. 5143: allows for dangerous high speed vehicular pursuits by law enforcement in DC.
- H.R. 2056: undoes DC's Sanctuary Values Amendment Act. This means that DC cannot act on its own authority as related to immigration.
- H.R. 884: restricts DC residents who are non-citizens but meet other residency requirements from voting in local elections.
- H.R. 2096: allows DC's Metropolitan Police Department to rehire officers who commit serious crimes.

The following bills have been introduced in the House but have yet to be voted on:

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

To educate both the public and lawmakers about the powerful and positive impacts of the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act/Second



Sign in front of the Universalist National Memorial Church, at 16th and S St NW

Look Amendment Act (IRAA), Free Minds created a booklet featuring the stories of eleven Free Minds members who came home through IRAA. Their stories concretely demonstrate how second chances and community support have empowered them to lead transformed lives and make meaningful contributions to their community. This is just one way that Free Minds and many individuals and organizations in DC are advocating to preserve DC's autonomy and laws.

**Bill synopsis credit: Free DC*

WORLD

In the late hours of Friday, February 27, President Donald Trump gave final approval for Operation Epic Fury, a massive joint operation against Iran carried out in tandem with Israel. The strikes destroyed significant parts of Iran's nuclear facilities and military infrastructure, and also killed the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. After a subsequently named interim leader was named and then also assassinated, Iranian officials announced that a three-person council would temporarily lead the country, which vowed revenge for the attacks by the U.S. and Israel.

The war against Iran commenced without any authorization from Congress, which the Trump administration maintains it does not need. It has been unwilling to share any details on specific objectives or a timeline for the United States' military presence in Iran, which as we write this had already led to the deaths of six members of U.S. Armed Forces.

In 2015, Iran entered into an agreement with the Obama administration that traded the nation cash and a lifting of sanctions for limiting their nuclear capabilities to energy and not weapons. President Trump withdrew from the deal in his first term, reimposing sanctions.

Tensions with Iran had escalated more recently since the October 7 attack on Israel by Hamas, a political and military group that controls the Gaza region of Palestine and is supported by Iran. In June of 2025, both Israel and the U.S. struck several nuclear sites in the country.

Just before the start of the new year, the nation's currency, the rial, plummeted in value, prompting mass demonstrations inside Iran. The internet was shut down across the country to prevent the protests from growing, as Trump encouraged Iranians to keep going. Tens of thousands of protestors were massacred in January, according to multiple reports out of the country.

IN THE NEWS

By John, FM Friend & Rebecca, FM Staff

During the month of February, the U.S. came to the table for nuclear talks with Iran mediated by the country of Oman. But as the month ended, diplomacy was pushed to the side as Epic Fury commenced. Iran immediately retaliated by launching air and missile strikes across the region, including in Israel, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait.

NATION

In February, the Supreme Court shot down a major piece of President Donald Trump's second-term agenda: the use of massive tariffs in part to extract favorable trade deals for the United States with other countries and the European Union.

In a 6-3 decision, the court's majority found that Trump's interpretation of a law called the International Emergency Economic Powers Act was flawed. While the law makes no specific reference to tariffs, which are fees levied on goods that are imported from other countries, the administration used the law to impose them. Trump has vowed to reinstate his tariffs using different legal justifications, which is sure to lead to further legal challenges.

Congress was able to work out a deal to fund most of the government and avoid another shutdown not long after the record-setting 43-day one that nearly derailed holiday travel in 2025. But one part of the federal government remains unfunded: the Department of Homeland Security. Senate Democrats have refused to collaborate on a spending agreement for the agency without changes to the way that Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operates.

Concerns about ICE, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security, have grown as the Trump administration continues to deploy it on highly public immigration raids that have mostly apprehended undocumented immigrants without criminal records. ICE employees have recently killed two American citizens during its operations in Minnesota.

Reverend Jesse Jackson, Sr. passed away on February 17, 2026 at the age of 84, leaving behind a powerful legacy of tenacity and resilience as a key figurehead in the civil rights movement. Rev. Jackson was a prominent civil rights activist who worked closely with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was also an early activist for LGBTQ rights, and he ran two trailblazing bids for the presidency in 1984 and 1988. In the 1990s, he served as DC's shadow senator (an elected position that does not have the right to vote in Congress, but advocates for DC Statehood on the federal level). Known for saying, "Keep Hope Alive," Rev. Jackson's endeavors and achievements have left a lasting legacy on our society.

D.C.

Two women who have helped to shape the political landscape of Washington, D.C. signaled the end of their political careers this winter.

Eleanor Holmes Norton retired as D.C.'s non-voting delegate to the U.S. Congress in January, ending a tenure that began when she succeeded Walter Fauntroy in 1991.



Congresswoman
Eleanor Holmes-Norton

And just before the new year, Mayor Muriel Bowser announced that she would not seek a fourth term. The Democratic primary to determine who

will likely succeed Bowser will include at least three members of the city council, and is scheduled for mid-June.

In late January, a massive 108-inch sewer pipe ruptured near Cabin John, Maryland, leading to a catastrophic spill into the Potomac River. More than 250 million gallons of raw sewage flowed into the river, turning sections of the water gray and prompting Mayor Bowser to declare a local state of emergency. At press time, DC Water had just recently presented an initial plan on environmental restoration of the area following a crisis response aided by FEMA.

In a sad move for local news, the Washington Post announced a round of layoffs in February that included 300 of the paper's 800 journalists. This action, at least for now, means the end of the Post's award-winning sports section and includes major cuts to both its local reporting team for the DMV and its international bureaus.

SPORTS

This winter's sports action peaked in early February as the conclusion of the NFL season gave way to a memorable Winter Olympics hosted by the Italian cities of Milan and Cortina.

In a season where few football teams emerged as truly dominant, the Seattle Seahawks were the notable exception. The squad, which has amassed a defensive unit that rivals the "Legion of Boom" rosters from its past Super Bowl runs, finished 14-3 in the NFC West, unquestionably the best division in either NFL conference this season. And they finished the season with a +191 point differential, the best in the league by a wide margin.



Seattle Seahawks

They were met by the New England Patriots, who shocked the world by going from one of the worst teams in the league last season to the top team in the AFC. Led by second-year quarterback Drake Maye, who narrowly missed out on winning MVP this season, the Pats got back to the big game with stout defense and grit against tough opponents in the Houston Texans and Denver Broncos.

In the final game of the season, the Seahawks were simply too much for the Patriots and their young star. In a defensive battle, the Hawks put some distance between the teams in the fourth quarter with two touchdowns and a field goal to win it 29-13.

The winter games began on Super Bowl weekend, and concluded a few weeks later with the United States finishing just behind Norway in both total and gold medals. Among the stars and stripes' standout gold-winning stars: Breezy Johnson, women's downhill skiing; Alysa Liu, women's figure skating; and men's speed skater Jordan Stoltz.



Olympic gold
medalist Alysa Liu

And in the final days of the winter games, both the men's and women's hockey teams won epic overtime games to snag gold medals away from our biggest international rival in the sport, Canada.

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!

I've been in and out of jail more times than I can count. I'm tired of it and I want something different. The crazy thing is, when I'm locked up, I am suddenly so smart and I think and say all the right things. Like how I'm going to stop smoking and doing drugs. And how this time I'll do all the right things to get custody of my kids back. When I'm making those plans, it's like I've never been more sure of anything in my life. And I feel so much hope for the future!

But then I get released, and something happens.

My question is how can I be the same person I am when I'm incarcerated (focused, determined, and hopeful) when I walk out those doors? How can I stop it all from just being "jail talk?"

Sincerely,
TG

TG & fam, thanks for sharing, so others may benefit. We'll start with this saying, "Where your talents and the need of the world cross, therein lies your vocation."

We could say therein lies your passion, your voice—that which energizes your life and gives you drive. Your passions by coincidence are the fuel at the heart of your vision and moreover your discipline. Passion or persistence keeps us at it when everything else says to quit. The key to how we create passion in our lives is to find our unique talents and special role or purpose in the world. This will assist one to create the new you, which one has to "know yourself, control yourself, and give yourself." Speaking of persistence (another form of having faith in self and in your beliefs) there comes rewards. So despite being in hot water at the moment, the journey causes us to travel the road less taken (the road of long hard work). Indeed it is well worth it. A well-lived life revolves around a passion to live on a consistent positive path. One where we know life may run off the path at times, but we also know we're going to get right back on the right path.

And at both those good and troubling moments, we have to know that they have been around to stay from the beginning of time. Despite what life has thrown at humans, we have overcome by managing our stress and figuring things out. While incarcerated, we use our time wisely, make some realistic goals, and follow through on them. Our reentry back into society and the new you starts the moment we are sentenced. Let this propel us into the correct direction we desire to go. When we do so, let's not take a fly by the moment resolution to life like we do every New Year's. What we then need to take and have is a prosperous everyday all day high spirited lifestyle change process.

First, we start with checking ourselves in what our other advice brother EW likes to coin "The 3 I's (Immaturity, Ignorance, & Impulsiveness) stages of life." Lifestyle change is outgrowing these youthful stages of life. I can remember a time when I was so arrogant, stubborn, cold, & closed-minded, that I thought I had all the answers to life and my future. How could I, when I never was thinking or acting rationally? When in fact I was never truly applying the knowledge or wisdom life had given me? TG, the brutal truth is it's easy to say and do all the right things under pressure, in abnormal circumstances, in a controlled environment. What truly defines us is what we are, what we think, and what we do (our integrity) when no one else is paying us any attention.

Second, when the unstoppable happens in our lives, both in and out of prison, we have to be well prepared to face loss, setbacks, tragedy, and discomfort. While still at the first sight of those moments, it's not the time to cry out the old American Anthem "F@% It" and use it as a cutoff to our responsibilities and revert back into our old lifestyle. We don't have the time to allow self-doubt to talk us into another undesired consequence. At those stressful moments use stress management techniques and think of a better solution. Third, we follow through on our dreams and needs, and we don't let a dysfunctional lifestyle creep back into our lives and kill our plans. Upon reentry and working on a balanced life, stick with your plans and invest time and resources in getting the mission done. True grit and strong character is not giving up in the face of calamity. I plead with us to tap into our gifts and talents to be the examples for others to follow. When we serve a higher purpose, it assists us to stay focused, grounded, and busy on a better path. So drugs and the streets are no longer our destinations. Coming from our positions, our focus, determination, and hope, our passions, very much need to be centered on our children and their community, family, freedom, and your higher power. Above all, time with them and not the nonsense. TG & fam, I hope this helps you with your goals with family and staying where you're most loved and needed.*

Advice Man EW has this to share: TG, the first thing that you need to understand is that it's easy to be disciplined while incarcerated. It's easy because there are less distractions inside compared to all of the distractions in society. That's why you seem so focused, feel so determined and are so hopeful. You're not battling with a plethora of distractions inside prison that you're up against when free. That's just the truth. Therefore, you have to truly want something different. You say that you do; so the next course of action is to implement a plan prioritizing your needs. I believe your goal is to regain custody of your children.

Now let's figure out the path to regaining custody. It has to begin with kicking your addictions. From there, assuming that

you do not have either of these yet, you have to find gainful employment with a steady income to provide a stable home for yourself and your children. That's the gist of it, but it won't be easy as it sounds. Something will always happen in life. You can't allow unexpected occurrences to deter you from regaining that custody. You just can't do that. That's where your focus comes in. Regardless of what's going on, don't be deterred. Not being deterred will establish your determination and with each step towards your goal, you'll be inspired to remain hopeful and passionate. That's addressing all three of your concerns. It's all in relation to someone that's needed: YOU! Your children need you, TG; so get focused, be determined, and remain hopeful.

In regards to jail talk, it's only jail talk while you're in jail. Speak those same affirmations while free and we'll call them Free Talk. Talk offers hope. Free Talk offers opportunity. Take advantage of the opportunity to better your life. Regardless of

location, you are the smart person that says all the right things. Now just go and do what you say, and believe in yourself.

Recap to Reenter:

- 1. Outgrow or check your 3 I's*
- 2. Buy into investing in yourself: behavior change, education, reentry skills, etc...*
- 3. Know how to respond to setbacks; manage your stress, reevaluate your plans*
- 4. Apply your rational knowledge & wisdom; trust a sound plan or seek counsel*
- 5. Despite the many circumstances, follow through! Follow through! Follow through!*

*We're blessed to be able to share,
TS*

CONVERSATION WITH ISAIAH

Hey Free Minds Family!

I'm the new kid on the Free Minds block! I started working with Free Minds last summer as the Prison Book Club Coordinator, but now I'm the Prison Book Club Specialist! It's so amazing to be a part of an incredible team. Am I still getting used to the Free Minds' jargon and acronyms? Yes! However, the team has been great at helping me remember them all. I even catch myself saying some of the jargon and acronyms nowadays! Some of you guys have met me before when I accompanied Kelli to one of the JBC (ha... look at me using Jail Book Club's acronym) sessions for my first author visit. Other members have met me through my letters that I've sent! Please write back (lol).

In the Prison Book Club, we get to know y'all through your letters and the multiple forms we send, so it's fair that y'all get to know me! So, I'm Isaiah, and I'm from Dallas, Texas! As a native Texan, I love our barbecue, Tex-Mex, music, and football. Additionally, I love basketball, track & field, and baseball. The teams that I root for are the Georgetown Hoyas, Texas Longhorns, New Orleans Saints, Dallas Mavericks, Washington Nationals, and Minnesota Lynx. Yes, my teams are everywhere, but I will defend every one of them no matter what! In the office, I'm a big trash talker, and it brings me joy to tell everyone that their team lost to my team or that their team is having a bad season! Again, I love to talk about sports!! So, if you write to the office to talk about sports or to mock my teams, I would love that! Also, if you know any good sports-related books, let me know! While I was an undergraduate, I had opportunities to work in the criminal defense field as an investigative intern. It brought me so much joy to be in the field investigating cases. This experience was educational and something I will never forget.

Now, you might ask what I do for Free Minds? As I mentioned before, I am the Prison Book Club Specialist. I help mail letters, enroll new members into PBC (ha... look at me using another one of Free Minds' acronyms for Prison Book Club), input books from the book orders we sent you guys into our database, send poetry and birthday cards, process requests to join Free Minds, organize the physical mail y'all send to the office, and handle other tasks. Engaging with RBC (ha... another Free Minds acronym for Reentry Book Club) members who come to the office and with PBC members through letters have been wonderful! Seeing you guys empower yourselves through

books and poetry has been remarkable! This observation right here is why I love working for Free Minds! Every single one of you should be proud of yourself.

"Roar!" shouted the lion. "Bark, Bark, Bark," screamed the Dalmation. Yes, I know that was corny, but for the love of our first Connect theme, which is Animal Kingdom, it was worth it!

When I think about Animal Kingdom, I think about The Lion King and the Discovery Channel! Also, I think about TV shows and movies that feature animals, like Penguins of Madagascar, The Secret Life of Pets, Ice Age, The Jungle Book, Charlotte's Web, Planet of the Apes, 101 Dalmatians, Air Bud, and other classics. Growing up, I loved watching Animal Planet and various shows on the Discovery Channel. Hearing the roars, hisses, and other animal sounds was very entertaining. As I reminisce, I see my younger self roaring back at the lion on the TV screen as if it were challenging my territory/pride, or flapping my arms as wings to escape a ravenous eagle on the hunt. There are plenty of memories from my past of me acting like an animal I saw on Animal Planet. I read a lot of National Geographic books about animals! Those books were informative and great to read. There is a restaurant called Rainforest Cafe that I loved going to when I was younger, and I still love going now (I'm not ashamed)! They're all over the US, so if one is near you when you're home, check it out! The atmosphere resembles an actual rainforest! The part I love the most about the restaurant is when the thunderstorm hits the rainforest. Hearing the rain, thunder, and the animatronic animals (e.g., gorillas and elephants) making noise makes it a cool place to visit and eat. Plus, seeing the animatronic animals move while the thunderstorm hits the forest is a sight to behold. I will definitely have to go back soon!

I don't own any pets at the moment, but I'm a proud uncle of Jade. Plus, a proud brother of Denzel Washington and a proud cousin of Mason. Those are my dogs (literally) and my family. RIP to Winston, my first born nephew, you're in Doggie Heaven now!! Your memory will live on.

I'd love to hear y'all's answer to this question. What animal could you outsmart and defeat?

Thank you for taking the time to engage in this "conversation" with me!

PAYING IT FORWARD: THERAPY DOG PROGRAM "PEOPLE ANIMALS LOVE" BRINGS PAWPRINTS, JOY, AND HEALING TO THE DMV *By Sofia*



Left to right: Mochi visiting Kensington Falls Church, Max at Bishop O'Connell High School, Attie at an October Wags for Wellness event

Most people can tell you that a wagging tail, soft fur, and slobbery dog kisses has brought them joy at least once in their life. The joy of a furry friend approaching you for cuddles is undeniable. I sat down with the executive director of an organization called People Animals Love (PAL) that has turned this very feeling into a broader mission, serving the DC, Maryland, and Virginia (DMV) area for over four decades.

PAL was founded in 1982 by a veterinarian and pastor duo who had seen the impact of animal companions, especially when people were experiencing grief and/or isolation. The mission of PAL is to harness the power of the human-animal bond to comfort the lonely, ease the pain of the sick, and enrich people's lives. They mainly do this through a therapy dog program in the DMV where volunteers team up with their dogs, both of which have been evaluated as a team behaviorally. The handler-dog teams go out into the community and serve the needs of a variety of populations, including those in correctional facilities, nursing homes, hospitals, school and university settings, and more.

Heather joined PAL as the executive director in 2021 after a 15 years-long career as an attorney. She shared with me that her decision to change careers was driven by a lifelong love for animal companionship. Heather was also experiencing the grief of her beloved dog whom she lost in 2018, saying, "That profound loss surfaced feelings of what's important in life and the power of the human-animal bond. Since childhood I had lots of animal companions and it has been important to me throughout my life. I gave myself permission to pursue that passion and it makes my heart happy doing this."

Heather has personally experienced the healing powers of the human-animal bond, and added that there are benefits for both the humans and the animals. "At PAL, we put an emphasis on a 'One Health Framework' which means that we're all connected, humans, animals, and the environment. What's good for one is good for the other, so we flourish together," she said.

To that end, PAL ensures that the dogs also enjoy the work. While a dog cannot voice their consent, the PAL team looks for therapy dogs that visually get as much out of their interactions in the community as the volunteers and clients do. There's a science behind this human-animal bond too. Heather explained that levels of oxytocin (the feel-good hormone in our brains) increase when we gaze into the eyes of friendly canines who stare back at us. We also feel a reduction in the stress hormone, cortisol. Other benefits include reductions of our perception of pain, a decrease in anxiety, and less feelings of loneliness.

A reduction in loneliness is a big theme in all of the work that PAL does, transcending specific settings. This occurs in a number of ways. Heather shared how dogs can serve as a social lubricant, allowing not only humans and dogs to connect, but also for humans to connect with one another and the dog serving as a vehicle to do so comfortably. She added that dogs are also non-judgemental and the clients need that, especially when there are no words to offer full comfort when people are really suffering through crises and trauma.

"One of the common threads we've seen from volunteers who are often in the recovery context, whether that be mental health treatment, substance abuse recovery, or correctional facilities, is that people who may be harder to reach through traditional treatment might be more likely to open up to this experience of human-animal interaction. They have never opened up before or broken down that wall, but working with the therapy dogs allows them to talk and completely change their facial expressions," Heather shared.

Heather elaborated more on the work that PAL does in correctional facilities, sharing that the program actually had its start at Lorton Penitentiary in Virginia, which used to incarcerate people from DC, but is no longer operational. Some volunteer teams at PAL regularly visit with people incarcerated at the Montgomery County Correctional Facility, and Heather shared that they always speak highly of their experiences. The volunteers shared that the spirits of the residents and staff are always raised after the

sessions. The residents love to share about their past pets and dogs prior to their incarceration. Heather expressed that the volunteers also get a lot out of the experience, gaining insight and compassion as it relates to the experience of incarceration.

She also looked back at their partnership with Arlington County Detention Facility who sent them a letter talking about the impact of PAL at their facility. They have a treatment program where clients talk about feelings of loyalty, vulnerability, trusting themselves and the world, and other social-emotional concepts. All of that was strengthened through their partnership with PAL in these human-animal interactions.

Heather added, "Being with the dogs calms the residents and puts them in a different state of mind. They feel the benefit of that unconditional positive regard from the dogs. Some residents say it's the most loved they've felt in a long period of time."

If you were in a facility that PAL visited, write to us and let us know how your experience went!

The work that Heather and her team does is rewarding and the most rewarding parts are hearing about and seeing pictures of the impact the work has on everyone from the dogs, to the clients, and the volunteers who handle the dogs. Some specific standout moments for Heather include an opportunity where the Jane Goodall Institute USA asked PAL to participate in the late Jane Goodall's Celebration of Life at the National Cathedral in DC. Jane Goodall was an English primatologist (scientist who studies primates) and anthropologist, who revolutionized the study of animal behavior and our understanding of chimpanzees and humanity. A fun fact is that Goodall's favorite animal was a dog. Check out one of Jane's quotes in the Quote-i-vator on page 5!

Another impact moment which demonstrates the range of PAL's impact was when the State Department invited their dog handler teams to comfort workers who were urgently working to evacuate people from Afghanistan in 2021. For several weeks, PAL's therapy dog teams provided support to the crisis workers and were even personally thanked in a letter from former Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

Before we closed out our conversation, Heather shared a meaningful interaction she had in the beginning of her career transition that truly demonstrates how the human-animal bond can foster human connections as well, allowing us to transcend barriers or even anxieties that might have prevented connections from forming otherwise in an age where loneliness is on the rise.

"When I was studying animal and human health, I was waiting in a doctor's office reading one of my textbooks. There was a man who was formerly incarcerated who started talking to me and sharing his experiences and discussing vulnerability. He started talking to me because he had worked with a dog while he was in prison and it was so impactful for him. We ended up having a great conversation about the power of the human-animal bond and while it wasn't a dog therapy program, he trained dogs instead, but he loved it. I don't think we would have talked to each other had that experience not been impactful for him," Heather ended with.

Check out a few photos on the left of PAL's pups out on the job!

CONNECT ON CORRLINKS *By Aneka*

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



Free Minds Corrlinks Info:

Corrlinks First Name: Free Minds

Corrlinks Last Name: Connect

Corrlinks Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org

Free Minds Getting Out Info:

Getting Out First Name: Connect

Getting Out Last Name: Free Minds

Getting Out Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org

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

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

Do you fit into one of these categories? If you do, please write us back and let us know so that we can send you the form needed to join the Book Club. Our **NEW** mailing address is Free Minds Book Club, P.O. Box 73618, Washington, DC 20056

AROUND THE WORLD: EMILY'S ROADTRIP FROM CALIFORNIA TO DC

By Emily



The landscape at White Sands

Hi everyone! I normally “connect” with you all through the tech column, but for this edition it is my pleasure to bring you with me on my road trip across the U.S. I grew up in the DMV and moved to San Francisco, California a few years ago, but this past summer my boyfriend, Colin, and I moved back to DC. We sent the majority of our stuff in a moving truck, packed up my car (which we affectionately call Gerry) and headed out!

When I moved out to San Francisco a few years ago, my mom and I drove from DC to California using a northern route. So this time, to keep it interesting, Colin and I decided to go south.

Our first stop was **Channel Islands National Park**, which is off the coast of Ventura, California, about 6 hours south of San Francisco. The National Park is comprised of 5 islands and the ocean surrounding them. Some of the islands are extremely remote and are only open for a few months a year. Even the most accessible island, Santa Cruz, requires a 1.5 hour ferry ride to get to!

Since this is the *Animal Kingdom* issue, let's talk about the wildlife. Santa Cruz Island is about 25 miles off the coast of California. The remote nature of the island means species on the island have adapted in some unusual ways. The “Island Theory” of evolution states that when isolated to distant islands, larger species will evolve to be smaller and smaller species will evolve to be larger. We saw the evidence for this theory firsthand: the Island Fox, which is native to Santa Cruz Island, is only 4 pounds, and the Island Scrub Jay (a bird) is over a foot long and one-third larger than its mainland counterpart!

I love to travel to National Parks, and Channel Islands is definitely the place that I have seen the most animals. I think it helps that you have to take a ferry to get out there. On the ferry ride alone we saw a pod of common dolphins (about 1,000 of them surrounded the boat, jumping and playing in the water), a few sea lions, brown pelicans flying overhead, and even three blue whales, which are the largest known animals in the world! Once we got to the island, we saw Garibaldi fish (which are large gold fish and the California state fish), sting rays, and leopard sharks all swimming under the dock that we used to disembark.

After a day hiking and exploring the island, we had to take the ferry back to Gerry and keep



The four pound “miniature” fox on Santa Cruz island. They loved to hang out by the picnic tables to see if they could scavenge any snacks.



The cholla cactus garden at sunrise in Joshua Tree.

moving in order to get to DC. I would go back to the Channel Islands in a heartbeat. What a beautiful place! We decided to stop by another National Park as we were heading out of California, **Joshua Tree National Park**. Joshua Tree is in the desert, and we were moving in the summer, so it was hot. The park is named after the iconic Joshua trees that grow there. The trees are twisted, gnarled, and spiky and look like something out of a Dr. Seuss book. We decided to go on a quick early morning hike while the temperatures were still cooler (in the 80s as opposed to in the 100s!). The park is also home to many really cool animals and plants including cholla cacti (fuzzy looking stalky plants) and quail (birds with a little feather dangling up over their heads). I was really hoping that we would see a rattlesnake (Colin was not!) but alas it was so hot that I think all of the animals were hiding out and trying not to expend energy.

After Joshua Tree it was time to wave goodbye to California and keep heading east. We stopped in Tuscon, Arizona, to go to the next park on our list, **Saguaro National Park**. This park is named after the Saguaro cactus, which can grow up to 50 feet tall! They can live to be 200 years old, and only begin to grow their first arm around 75 years old. It was awe-inspiring to stand next to one of these giants. The Sonoran desert, where the park is located, is home to a large number of mammals, reptiles, birds, and amphibians. Not many were out during our quick hike, but we did see piles of brush at the base of prickly pear cacti that were home to little desert pack rats. My mom always called my sister a pack rat growing up due to her affinity for collecting things, but it wasn't until this trip that I learned that it is a real animal!



After Saguaro, we drove into New Mexico and made a quick stop at **White Sands National Park**. As we approached, it seemed like the park didn't exist! Then, out of nowhere, we saw waves and waves of white sand. Well, it looked like white sand. Apparently, it is actually a common mineral called gypsum, which is used in things like toothpaste and drywall. 280 million years ago, the area was covered by a shallow body of water and as it evaporated, gypsum was left behind. It is again a desert environment, so we didn't see many animals. What we did see, however, was people using sleds

to slide down the dunes! We climbed to the top of one and had fun playing in the "sand." As we were walking around, I noticed teeny tiny tracks in the sand. We followed the tracks, and saw a little darkling beetle making his way through the dunes. Once we realized that we could find wildlife via their footprints, it was like a whole new side of the park opened up to us! We found what we thought were the tracks of a mouse, a jackrabbit, and possibly a fox or coyote. It was such a cool way to visualize all of the animals that prowl the park after dark.

The next day, we had another stop to make in New Mexico: **Carlsbad Caverns National Park**. I had been really looking forward to this one - Carlsbad Cavern is one of a network of 300 underground limestone caves that were formed from a fossil reef that existed around 265 million years ago. To get into the cave, you can either take an elevator about 70 stories down or walk down the 1.25 mile path. We elected to walk down, but we sure were grateful for the elevator to get back out :). The cave has a series of "rooms" with different geologic features. A ranger at the bottom of our descent taught us how to differentiate between stalagmites and stalactites - you "mite" run into a stalagmite because they grow up from the floor, whereas stalactites hold on "tite" to the ceiling. I can only describe the experience of walking around the "Big Room" of the cavern as otherworldly. It is pitch black down there and the eerie lighting that the park has set up casts dramatic shadows and shows just how shiny and damp everything is. Of course, the main animal attraction in the cave is the bats, though many other animals (and a ton of insects) also call the cave home. Every night at sunset, thousands of bats emerge from the back recesses of the cave and fly out of the opening into the night sky to search for food. I was super excited to see this phenomenon, but unfortunately there was a thunderstorm the night we were there and the ranger-led bat program was cancelled. Guess it means I just have to go back!

After we left New Mexico, sans bat-sighting but with a whole new appreciation for the world that exists below us, we headed east to stay with friends in Austin, Texas. I could keep writing about this road trip forever, but this article is already too long, so here's a quick summary of the final few days of the trip. We spent a night in New Orleans, Louisiana, where I made my dreams of eating a beignet (a fluffy, pillowy doughnut) come true, and another in Montgomery, Alabama learning and reflecting at the incredible Legacy Sites Museum created by Bryan Stevenson (author of *Just Mercy*) exploring the legacy of slavery on the United States and its connections to modern day mass incarceration. We finished up our trip with quick visits to friends in Atlanta and North Carolina before pulling up to our new home in DC. It was the roadtrip of a lifetime and I'm curious - if you were planning a cross-county road trip, what stops would you include?

From top to bottom: The iconic Joshua trees; Looking up at a giant saguaro cactus; Spooky cave feature from Carlsbad caverns.

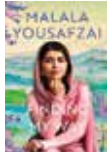
WHAT WE'RE READING

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."

- **Shahana: *Finding My Way: A Memoir* by Malala Yousafzai**

I recently finished *Finding My Way* by Malala Yousafzai, and something she says early on has really stuck with me. She talks about the look of disappointment people give her when she can't recall the details of when she was shot during a murder attempt, saying, "As if the worst thing that ever happened to me was the most interesting part of my life." Something many of us can relate to. The way she tells her story feels honest and deeply human. As she got older, she wanted a normal life with college, friendships, and everyday experiences, only to realize that facing her trauma was necessary to get there. At just 28, she's lived a life that's both complicated and impactful, turning pain into global advocacy and real change. As a Pakistani woman, I'm proud to call her a role model.



- **Rebecca: *The Belles* by Dhonielle Clayton**

This Young Adult fantasy book takes place in a land where the people have been cursed to be ugly. A select group of women, "The Belles," possess magical powers to make a person beautiful, for a price. As the newest generation of Belles enter the world of "beauty work," Camellia Beauregard, the queen's favorite Belle, begins to uncover dark secrets in the royal household and a sinister plot that endangers everyone she loves. This book is a great social commentary on beauty and what price we're willing to pay for "the look."



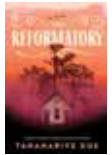
- **Tara: *SuperCommunicators: How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection* by Charles Duhigg**

I'm about halfway through this book, and it's a great reminder on the best techniques for having difficult conversations and how to communicate across differences. The book has a lot of examples. One chapter details gathering people with polar opposite views on gun policies and discussing solutions to gun violence. It was fascinating how they used the techniques mentioned in this book to find common ground. Another chapter talked about studies on couples who end up divorced, and how they communicated during fights. I recommend this book!



- **Julia: *The Reformatory* by Tananarive Due**

A horror novel set in Florida in the 1950s, this book follows a 12-year-old boy named Robert who has an ability to connect with haunts, or spirits of people who have died. Living in the Jim Crow South, Robert is unjustly sentenced to 6 months incarceration in the "reformatory," which is really a youth prison. There, Robert begins to see the spirits of other boys who died or were killed at the reformatory. In this dangerous environment, he must learn how to survive, and how to use his ability to make it home to his family. I haven't finished the book yet so I don't know how it's going to turn out, but it's riveting so far. It's a harrowing read though, made even more difficult by the knowledge that it is based on the true story of the atrocities committed at the Dozier School for Boys in Florida in the 1900s (the same reform school that the novel and movie *The Nickel Boys* is based on).



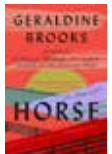
- **Jennifer: *Project Hail Mary* by Andy Weir**

While gobbling popcorn in the Gallery Place theater with my daughter waiting for the *Wicked: For Good* movie to start, we watched Ryan Gosling starring in the trailer for *Project Hail Mary*, an adaptation of the space-based novel by Andy Weir, who also wrote *The Martian*, which I haven't read since I rarely pick up a sci-fi book. But something about the themes of connection, purpose, and determination inspired me to get on my library holds list and I'm glad I did. The book was an exciting read - although I must admit to skimming over some of the more scientific concepts, especially since it sometimes felt as if Weir were mansplaining them to me. However, the drama kept me engaged and thinking long after I had returned the book about humanity, the impact one's life can have, and what I would have done in the protagonist's space shoes.



- **Kelli: *Horse* by Geraldine Brooks**

I got this historical fiction title from the library after my friend gave it high praise, and I loved it! The author imagines the missing pieces of the story of Lexington, one of the greatest racehorses ever, and his enslaved groom, a young Black man named Jarret. The book moves between their story in pre-Civil War Kentucky and 2020, when a young woman working at the Smithsonian discovers a remarkable horse skeleton in the museum's attic that turns out to be Lexington. It blends the excitement of horse racing with a deep exploration of racism, past and present. Easily four out of five stars for me!



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 or Bookshop.org.. 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.

Living Behind the Wall by James Pope aka Abdul Kareem:

Description provided by the author: In *LIVING BEHIND THE WALL*, James Pope aka Abdul Kareem takes readers on a profound journey into the mind of a prisoner, exploring the complexities of survival, transformation, and self-awareness within the confines of incarceration. Drawing on real-life stories and deep sociological insight, this book unveils the raw, unfiltered perspectives of individuals who are often written off by society.



FREE MINDS FURRY FRIENDS By Tony

Once I heard our next *Connect* issue's theme would be Animal Kingdom, I figured it would be a great opportunity to introduce you all to Free Minds Furry Friends. This collection of Furry Friends is provided by the staff at Free Minds. We all seem to have one, so getting them all on one page was a task I felt was necessary for Animal Kingdom. Hope you love our Furry Friends as much as we do!!! Until next time.



ROW 1: LEFT TO RIGHT

- This is Archie. He is spoiled rotten and loves getting into mischief. – Kelli
- Meet Orfeo, pictured here celebrating his 11th birthday. 😊 – Julia
- This is my Yorkie named Jody! Like me, he loves traveling, hiking, and kayaking. Fun fact: I named him after R&B singer Tyrese's character in the movie *Baby Boy!* – Aneka
- This is Daisy – her main hobbies are getting cozy and scavenging on any paper products she can find. – Emily
- This is Quinn. She loves playing fetch and can open doors 😊 – Sofia

ROW 2: LEFT TO RIGHT

- Sir Enzo the Terrible. Don't let the face fool you! – Carlos
- Meet Bean. Named in honor of Kobe. Belly rub enthusiast, cold weather critic. – Shahana
- This is Belle the dog and Cosmo the cat. They love snuggling, playing with toys, and eating turkey. – Ruby
- Meet Mischief, age 11. – Jennifer
- This is Remi. She is very clingy, playful, and loves barking at other dogs but really a lover at heart! – Regina

ROW 3: LEFT TO RIGHT

- This is Hilo. He loves tater tots but not my mother-in-law! – Allen
- This is Beasley. He is fluent in both English and Spanish! – Neely
- This is Annie. She loves her morning runs. – Tony
- This is Jack. He loves sitting on anyone's lap and playing fetch morning, noon and night. – Tara
- This is Dracula. Unlike most vampires he licks you to death instead of biting. – FM Newsman John

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club

The Many Lives of Mama Love: A Memoir of Lying, Stealing, Writing, and Healing by Laura Love Hardin with Neely



Our latest Books Across the Miles selection was *The Many Lives of Mama Love: A Memoir of Lying, Stealing, Writing, and Healing* by Lara Love Hardin. Her memoir details how 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). Thank you to everyone who shared their thoughts on this book, here is what some of you had to say!

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?

JS: I agree with Lara in a sense because sometimes you have to put your feelings, your wants, and sometimes your needs aside so you can be someone you're not for someone who needs you.

MC: I have to respectfully disagree with Lara. These types of thoughts are what brought her to be incarcerated. Showing up as her authentic self, right away or indifferent, would've changed the trajectory of her life. I believe that people around her may have been instrumental in supporting her and helping her to see the error in her ways before she ended up in "6."

IK: Yes, I agree. I am working on loving myself unapologetically good, bad, or ugly. Being vulnerable and presenting any side of myself to get through a situation is a strong thing to do. Lara is so funny and honest. Right now as we speak, I'm doing the fit psychology treatment and it's only my 5th day here and I've put pressure on myself to fit and understand how everything works. I overwhelm myself worrying about mistakes I make. My mom advised me to just be myself and that I don't want to be perceived as "fake." The psychology program has other women like myself who weren't being the best versions of themselves. NOT perfect, will never be, but trying to be better than who we were in the past.

PD: As I grow older, and especially after going through my current situation, I've come to realize everyone is a work in progress. Some people are in better places than others. So yes, Lara showing up as she is, is better than not showing up at all. I don't know, perhaps it shows courage?

TJT: I do agree because sometimes we push forward past hard times, and in order to do this we have to put ourselves on autopilot. This may not be who we are, but we have to be at that moment in order to get through those moments. Fake it to make it, so to speak.

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?

IK: Putting pen to paper is a coping mechanism when I'm mad, really sad, and simply bored. Maybe with writing people are able to cope with reality whatever it is to them. My relationship with writing started very young. I'm always filling up notebooks. It's an escape for me, a vessel to put everything going on this little head of mine onto paper. In literature, I really like the "show don't tell" technique because with details it paints great pictures in my head, so I understand the story.

TJT: Writing gives us a moment to be inside of our heads and not in the fast grind, which is full of actions more than thoughts. Writing plays a big part in my life. It helps me to find, order, and focus on the thoughts that linger disorderly and the ones that carry emotions... sometimes emotions are vague, but clarity helps settle them.

PD: Yes. It has started to. Prior to becoming a part of Free Minds, I only wrote out of necessity and mostly to-do lists. Never about my feelings or what was going on in my life. I believe that writing is very personal and can really help with sorting out thoughts and feelings. I now enjoy writing.

JS: I think writing has the ability to help people process their feelings and experiences because it gives an opportunity for

people, me specifically, to literally see how they feel and process those feelings in a third party way. It's as if the paper is talking to you, telling you what it sees you feel after the pen has told it to the paper, after you told it to the pen. Writing plays a major role in my life because it's my personal therapy session that I can choose to share or not.

MC: I think that people are able to use writing to express their thoughts and experiences because the paper doesn't judge. We are able to get out what we feel without being interrupted. Writing has always been a big part of my life. This is how I know what Lara means.

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?

PD: Frankly, I am still learning what pulls me. I want to say thoughts and over-thinking everything. I need to explore that more.

JS: A vision that pulls me is glimpses of further failure, further disappointment, and more self-inflicted pain. I don't know, and can't imagine, what a vision of success outside of prison feels like, but the emotions and energy felt from falling hard motivates me to work hard as if there is a piece of steak dangling on a buss down platinum chain while I run on a treadmill training to get it.

MC: The vision that pulls me is a better future in general. Of course I have plans in the future, but the visions I'm most excited about are helping others through various ventures.

TJT: The vision that pulls me is full-on self respect and dignity and purpose in my life, especially on the street (home). These visions orient me and center me, giving balance amongst chaos. This is necessary for me to have the energy/will to persevere.

IK: I have multiple visions, but in one big scoop my vision for my life is to feel good about myself, to be stable, to be ready and comfortable, and to feel fulfilled. I want some careers and they are all centered around helping others and making myself feel good like, for example, a travel agent. I'm thinking about it in an entrepreneurial way to think outside of booking airline tickets and being on a computer. I'm thinking about other avenues using the skills I'll have as a travel agent, where I can be an advocate for things I'm passionate about like youth rights. As a travel agent I'll do campaigns like stranger danger and drunk driving. Those things correlate with traveling, transportation, and making humanity better in my own way.

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?

TJT: Yes, *The Warrior of the Light* by Paulo Coelho is a great book. Also, the Bible, which, of course, is full of motivation and inspiration to be good-hearted. Psalms 23 is very important to me because humans always want to, and don't always, feel content in life.

JS: Yes, there have been a lot of books I read, like *My Grandmother's Hands*, *The Light We Carry*, and *The Many Lives of Mama Love* that address social injustice that a lot of us know, and acknowledges the extensive work needing to be done while giving ways to help live and thrive despite the challenges we face.

MC: I've read many books since being incarcerated that transformed the way that I think, but if I had to choose one, I'd say the dictionary has had a lasting impact on me. I'd say the dictionary because I discovered I liked to use my words to be able to express myself and I happen to be good at it.

PD: I read a lot of biographies about different people from all walks of life. With every book I read, I get a different impression, which causes me to think. Generally, each book leaves a little impression on me.

IK: One book I have read is the *Fire on High* by Elizabeth Acevedo.

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?


MC: If I were tasked to write a chapter in a book about self-forgiveness, the advice or insight I would want to share is how I am worthy. I would ask myself the rhetorical question, "How can you expect others to forgive you and give you a second chance if you aren't willing to give yourself a chance and forgive yourself?" I'd include motivational quotes and affirmations also.

IK: Self-forgiveness is so hard because 9/10 times you never saw yourself doing something bad or disappointing others prior to it happening. I beat myself up a lot because it's better than to feel the pressure or scolding externally. In order to forgive others, one must give that grace to themselves. That's the equation that will help in healing through hard, embarrassing moments in life. So forgive yourself!

TJT: Nobody is perfect and just because I was caught doing a crime doesn't mean you never committed one. Your "dirt" doesn't make you're "trash," and your past doesn't have to determine your future. The heart makes the man, not his past.

JS: We are all human and because of our humanity, which renders us imperfect, we will all fall victim to mistakes we made. The only choice we have in the matter is if we fall into believing the narrative that is made of people who make mistakes that other people are aware of, if we believe the self righteous rhetoric that says because we made a mistake, whether big or small, we are incompetent, stupid, unworthy, and irreparably immoral.

PD: I am very hard on myself! Especially about the crimes that resulted in me serving time. I feel extreme guilt and remorse. I am starting to forgive myself, be more positive and look towards the future. However, I don't feel that I am in a place to offer advice or suggestions on forgiving oneself since I am still in that process.

A close-up photograph of a giant panda's face as it eats bamboo. The panda's black and white fur is clearly visible, and its mouth is open, holding a piece of bamboo. The background is slightly blurred, showing green foliage and a wooden fence.

DID YOU KNOW: ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

By Haven

Environmental conservation has become a huge topic of discussion over the past couple decades. Scientists from across the globe have been documenting some of the harmful effects of climate change and human activity on the natural world and the animal kingdom. In order to preserve habitats and biodiversity, and prevent these problems from becoming too dire to fix, conservation efforts have grown exponentially. Projects today range from local efforts, like neighborhood street cleanups, to international treaties, like the Paris Climate Agreement.

Even though it has become much more prevalent in recent years, conservation has been around for centuries. Some of the first governmental acts of conservation in the United States were the creation of National Parks; Yellowstone National Park was the first, established in 1872 by President Theodore Roosevelt (National Park Service, 2025). Today, we have 63 official parks and over 400 total sites that fall under the National Park Service (National Park Foundation, 2026).

You might not think of DC as an example of an “animal kingdom,” but in reality, lots of important conservation work happens here. There are dozens of regional programs designed to preserve the natural environment in the DMV area, such as community gardens and volunteer opportunities. The World Wildlife Fund even has its US headquarters in DC. But aside from these, some people might not know that a lot of conservation work in DC actually happens at the Smithsonian National Zoo!

The Smithsonian's National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute (NZCBI) functions both at the Zoo itself and on research campuses across the country to contribute to many ongoing conservation projects. According to their website, this work affects a variety of different species and habitats from around the world, including Asian elephants, amphibians in Panama, and much more. Their researchers study genetic tools, monitor endangered species, and advocate for habitat restoration, while other members of the organization focus on community outreach and education (NZCBI, 2026). However, some of their most

well-known work has been with an unlikely yet beloved animal: the giant panda.

Many people have heard that the Zoo houses two beloved pandas from China named Bao Li and Qing Bao, who have become one of DC's major attractions (after the previous pair of pandas, Tian Tian and Mei Xiang, and their cub Xiao Qi Ji returned to China in 2023). According to the NZCBI website, the two were born in China and were moved to DC in 2024, which is where they will stay until 2034. You can visit them at the Zoo, and even if you can't make it in person, the Zoo has a Giant Panda Cam that runs from 7am-7pm each day, broadcasting the pandas in their habitat in real time.

But why are the pandas here in DC? Well, they are part of the Smithsonian's giant panda conservation program. The goals of the program are to study giant panda behavior, health, habitats, and reproduction in order to save the pandas from threats to their survival. In fact, after years of research, the program's breakthroughs have helped move the panda from the “endangered” classification to “vulnerable” on the International Union for Conservation's list of threatened species (NZCBI, 2026). When people visit the Zoo and support their programs, they help expand this important work.

Aside from the pandas, though, there are hundreds of species and habitats that need protection. Research programs like those at the Zoo are essential for keeping our animal kingdom safe and preserving the natural world.

We can help these conservation efforts as individuals too. There are many small adjustments we can make to our lives to help out the planet, such as by using a reusable water bottle, planting gardens with native flowers, and turning off unnecessary lights (National Park Service, 2026). Even individual acts like these can add up to make significant changes for the better. We can all do our part to help protect our environment—and in doing so, we can help protect Bao Li and Qing Bao too.

DC CULTURE: ROCK CREEK PARK

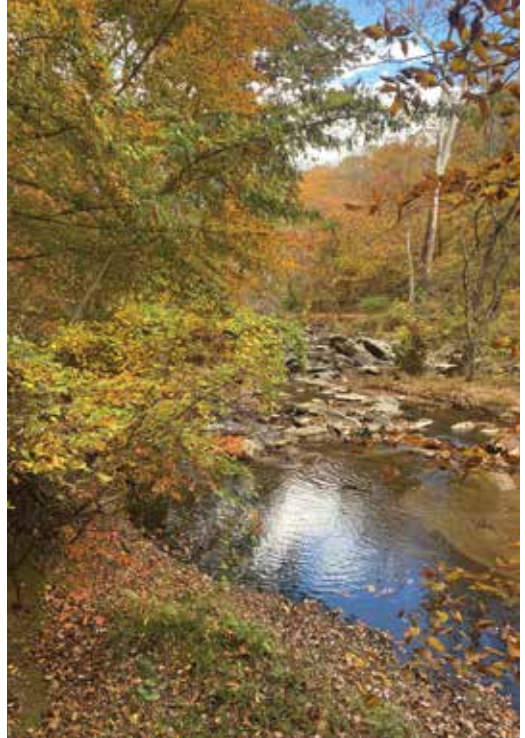
By Sofia

When people imagine a sprawling urban park, Central Park in New York City usually comes to mind. But there's a huge urban nature oasis right here in our backyard in Washington, D.C. Rock Creek Park is a large urban park in D.C. that comprises 1,754 acres, simultaneously offering a peaceful break from the city hustle while intertwining with the life and landscape of D.C.

Rock Creek Park is personally one of my favorite parts of living in DC. Unlike some other urban areas in the country, I don't necessarily feel like I have to travel miles and miles away to feel the grass beneath my feet and inhale the fresh oxygen of an abundant forest. Rock Creek Park was established as one of the first national parks in the country in 1890. The park cuts through the Northwest quadrant of the city and is largely along Rock Creek which is a tributary (a freshwater stream or river that flows into a larger, or parent, river (mainstem) or lake, rather than directly into the sea or ocean) of the Potomac River. It is the oldest natural urban park in the National Park System. Unlike some other National Parks, Rock Creek Park does not have an entry fee or require a daily pass. The park offers a wide variety of activities and is quite accessible.

While accessing the park by car can come in handy, it is very accessible by foot and even public transportation. I myself have wandered onto trails straight from the bus near the Columbia Heights and Mt. Pleasant neighborhoods. Speaking of trails, Rock Creek Park is abundant in them and is great for those who enjoy hiking of all levels. Some trails are flat and paved for bikers, walkers, and rollerbladers alike where you may also encounter cars commuting throughout Northwest DC. A car ride in this part of the city will definitely allow for a view of the park. However, parts of the park are closed to cars on the weekend. Other areas of the park make you feel like you aren't even in DC anymore and are more remote, offering dirt paths and lush forestry.

The park boasts many other activity areas including a golf course and tennis courts. Dogs also love hiking in the park and many can be found enjoying the smells and excitement of Rock Creek Park on weekends along with their families. One can also get a history lesson at Rock Creek Park by visiting Peirce Mill, a water-powered grist mill in the park. It was built in the 1820s by Isaac Peirce, along with a house, barn, and other buildings. It became part of Rock Creek Park in 1892 and offers a glimpse into another time period. The barn at the mill is currently a museum where visitors can learn about the milling process, the Peirce family estate, and other mills in the Rock Creek Valley. There are also picnic tables in this area where people can gather to eat and be in community with one another,



Rock Creek Park in Northwest DC

Within Rock Creek Park is an impressive equestrian center. The Rock Creek Park Horse Center, founded in 1972, is located in the middle of the park near the Nature Center. The Horse Center offers lessons, trail rides, pony rides, summer camps, and therapeutic riding. The barn is also home to Rock Creek Riders, a therapeutic riding program for adults and children with special needs in the D.C. area. Past participants in the program include brain-injured veterans of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and people with autism, cerebral palsy, or attention deficit disorder.

Rock Creek Park is a unique and often overlooked feature of the nation's capital. This urban haven offers so many opportunities for city dwellers to connect with nature and experience the therapeutic benefits of natural life without having to travel miles away.

Were you familiar with Rock Creek Park before reading this article and do you have any memories there? What are other elements of DC culture, music, food, literature, etc., that you want to read more about? Write in and let us know, we love to hear from you!

FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB

P.O. Box 73618

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NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: GENERATIONS

By Julia

Boomers. Gen X. Millennials. Gen Z. Gen Alpha. We talk a lot about different generations and their different experiences or perspectives. Like, what is up with the Gen Alpha 6-7 joke? (Don't ask me, I'm a millennial so officially too old to get it). But joking aside, every generation, from children to our elders, has valuable insights and wisdom that we can all learn from. We often talk about learning from our elders, but I believe that our youth have plenty to teach us as well. What lessons have you learned from other generations, both younger and older? What do you wish other generations understood about you and your generation? Sometimes in history there are cultural or historical events that have a significant impact on people growing up at that time. For example, 9/11, the crack era, or more recently the COVID-19 pandemic. What were some of these historical or cultural events that affected you or your generation when you were growing up? When you think about the future generations that haven't been born yet, what kind of legacy do you wish to leave for them?

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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