

free MINDS
Book Club & Writing Workshop

IMPACT REPORT 2025



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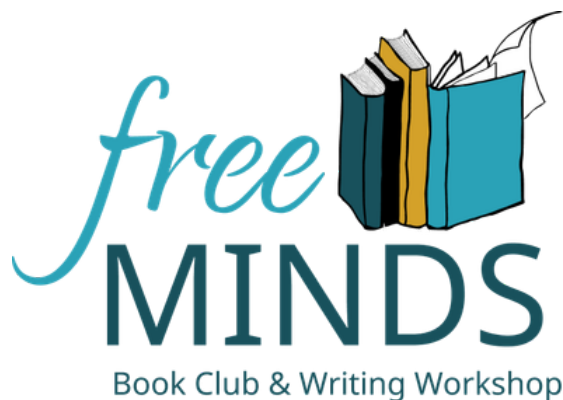
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FREE MINDS 2025 IMPACT



1,800

members
served



110+

correctional
facilities we are
present in



95%

members did not
return to jail or
prison



90%

members employed
or enrolled in a
vocational training
program



5,674

personally
selected books
distributed to
members



288

book club
sessions held



2,050

letters
exchanged
with staff,
volunteers, and
members



168

members served
in leadership
roles as peer
supporters,
advocates, and
facilitators



2,593

people
participated in
Free Minds led
community
peacebuilding
sessions

JAIL BOOK CLUB

The Jail Book Clubs at the DC Jail and juvenile detention facility provide a rare and vital space for healing, learning, and self-expression. In an environment where vulnerability is often seen as a risk, our weekly book clubs create a sanctuary where members feel safe enough to read aloud, write openly, and share their thoughts and emotions.

In 2025, Free Minds served **462 members** through our in-person Jail Book Clubs, including **216 women and 60 youths**. Through consistent engagement, **80% of members completed reading assignments and 79% completed writing assignments**, strengthening critical thinking skills and building the tools needed to pursue their personal goals.



462

members participated in
Jail Book Clubs, including **216** women
and **60** youth



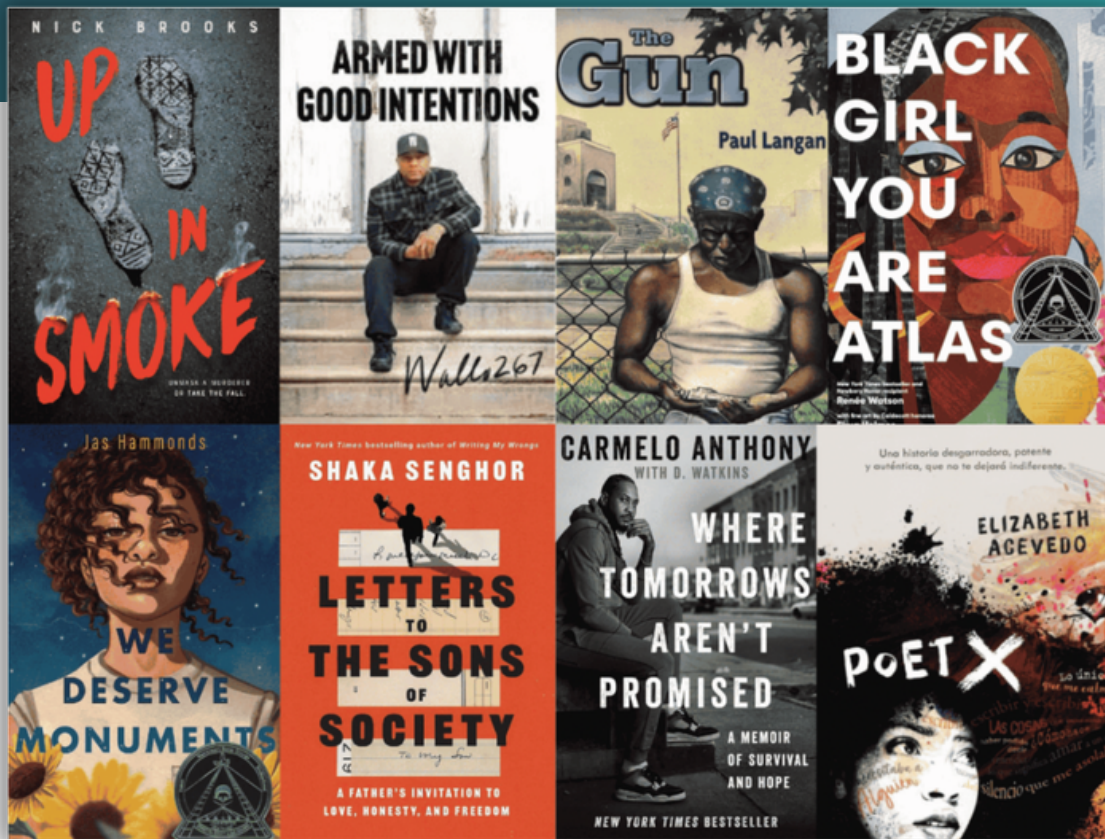
80%

of members completed
reading assignments



79%

engaged in writing exercises, using poetry
and personal essays to process their
experiences



Through bibliotherapy, a therapeutic approach that uses relatable literature and storytelling to promote healthy coping mechanisms by encouraging self-reflection, emotional healing, and personal growth, members participate in selecting the books they read, voting through ballots curated around their interests and lived experiences. Each book club session incorporates creative writing as a pathway for expression and healing. Members respond to writing prompts through poetry and other forms of creative storytelling, sharing their work with the group and receiving encouraging feedback from volunteers across the community. This positive affirmation reinforces members' identities as writers and storytellers, and provides powerful motivation to continue using creative writing as a tool for reflection, growth, and resilience.

In 2025, members explored powerful works including *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds, *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone, *La casa de los ángeles rotos (House of the Broken Angels)* by Luis Alberto Urrea, *Finding Me* by Viola Davis, and *The Upcycled Self: A Memoir on the Art of Becoming Who We Are* by Tariq Trotter. These stories create meaningful entry points for discussion, allowing members to see reflections of their own journeys while imagining new possibilities for their futures.

free MINDS

Book Club & Writing Workshop



Author Kelis Rowe leading a poetry workshop with the members of our Women's Book Club.

In April, author **Kelis Rowe** joined the Women's Book Club at the DC Jail after members read her young adult novel *Finding Jupiter*, a story exploring love, identity, and the complexities of life through the eyes of two Black teenagers. During her visit, Rowe led a poetry workshop inspired by the book's protagonist, Ray, who creates "blackout poetry"—an art form that reveals hidden meaning by blacking out selected words from a page. Members eagerly crafted their own poems and proudly shared them with the group. Rowe signed copies of her book for each participant, and one member was so moved that she vowed to keep her signed copy forever, planning to display it in a glass case once she returned home.

In September, entrepreneur and criminal legal reform advocate **Marcus Bullock** visited the emerging adult unit to discuss *The 10X Rule: The Only Difference Between Success and Failure* by Grant Cardone. Drawing from his own experience of incarceration and reentry, Bullock spoke about the goal-setting principles that helped him build a successful business after returning home. His story deeply resonated with members, inspiring conversations about ambition, resilience, and the power of setting bold goals.

"Hearing Marcus Bullock's story was truly inspirational. I'm also about to become a returning citizen with entrepreneurial goals, and he gave us invaluable insight and guidance. I appreciated his real talk about how rocky the road can be, while also giving us so much encouragement.

He is living proof that despite the challenges, it can be done."

- Free Minds Member KC



Former NBA players Etan Thomas and Javaris Crittenton inspired with a message on the power of accountability, forgiveness, and hope while visiting our book club with youth incarcerated at DC's Youth Services Center.

In December, NBA players **Etan Thomas** and **Javaris Crittenton** visited the youth book club at the juvenile detention facility. Thomas, an accomplished poet and author, and Crittenton, who returned home in 2023 after incarceration, spoke openly about perseverance, accountability, and the lessons they learned while navigating adversity. Several youth members shared their own original poetry during the visit, receiving enthusiastic applause and encouragement. Their messages challenged members to remain focused on their goals and imagine the possibilities waiting for them beyond incarceration.

Also in December, award-winning author **Elizabeth Acevedo** visited the Spanish-language book club at the DC Jail. Acevedo read an excerpt from her celebrated novel *The Poet X*, which tells the story of a young woman who discovers slam poetry as a powerful outlet for self-expression while navigating family expectations and identity.

Members eagerly asked Acevedo about her writing process and how she developed the novel's characters and themes. Many expressed how meaningful it was to hear from a Spanish-speaking author whose cultural experiences reflected their own.

"Her [Kelis Rowe's] visit was amazing. She showed us an innovative way to combine poetry, literature and art. It was interesting how many of us were able to find very personal stories within the pages we were given."

- Free Minds Member NC

PRISON BOOK CLUB

For members serving time in federal prisons across the country, the Free Minds Prison Book Club is more than a book program, it is a powerful source of connection, learning, and personal transformation. Because Washington, DC is not a state, individuals convicted in the District are often sent to federal prisons hundreds or even thousands of miles away, separating them from their families, communities, and support systems. Free Minds is one of the only organizations in DC that supports members both before and after conviction, and through our Prison Book Club, now reaching more than **110 federal prisons nationwide**, many members maintain one of their strongest connections back to home.

In the isolation of incarceration, where opportunities for meaningful engagement are limited, receiving a thoughtfully selected book or a handwritten letter serves as a powerful affirmation of one's humanity. Through the Prison Book Club, members remain connected to a vibrant literary community that recognizes their voices, nurtures their creativity, and encourages their continued growth.

In 2025, Free Minds served **898 members incarcerated in federal prisons**, providing access to books, writing opportunities, and connection to a broader learning community. To support intellectual exploration and personal reflection, we distributed **5,403 books** to members and mailed **five issues of *Free Minds Connect***, our literary magazine featuring poetry, essays, and artwork created by members alongside contributions from staff and community supporters. Seeing their work published and shared reinforces members' identities as writers, thinkers, and contributors to a collective dialogue.

5,403

Books mailed to members



898

Members incarcerated in federal prisons



5

Issues of Free Minds Connect



458

Original poems written



1,126

Letters exchanged



Members also participated in our **Letter Writers Circle**, a correspondence exchange that pairs members with a rotating group of community volunteers. Through this program, members strengthen literacy and communication skills while building meaningful connections beyond prison walls. In 2025 alone, members wrote **458 original poems** and exchanged **1,126 letters** with Free Minds staff and volunteers.

In our **“Books Across the Miles”** program, members participate in shared reading experiences by voting on titles to explore together. In 2025, members collectively selected *The Many Lives of Mama Love: A Memoir of Lying, Stealing, Writing and Healing* by Lara Love Hardin, *The Light We Carry: Overcoming in Uncertain Times* by Michelle Obama, and *Where Tomorrows Aren’t Promised: A Memoir of Survival and Hope* by Carmelo Anthony.

“Language allowed me, through poetry, to find that lost inner-child that I had to suppress, and the trauma I was forced to endure. It was through my poetry that I started to find healing... as a way to move forward and to make the ultimate decision to not let my formative years define how my future would play out.”

- Free Minds Member DK

Through books, writing, and correspondence, members are reminded that their voices matter, their growth continues, and their stories are still unfolding. Even across thousands of miles and prison walls, the Prison Book Club ensures that Free Minds members remain connected to literature, to community, and to the place they still call home.



2025 Free Minds Connect issues, capturing the stories, voices, and community that shaped the year.

REENTRY BOOK CLUB

The Free Minds Reentry Book Club builds upon the sustained connection established through our Jail and Prison Book Club programs, where preparation for reentry begins long before release. These early engagements foster critical thinking, literacy, and self-reflection, laying the groundwork for successful reintegration. Once home, members continue their journey through the Reentry Book Club, where they receive comprehensive support, community connection, and leadership opportunities. Through a holistic, member-led approach, Free Minds provides individualized case management, job placement assistance, professional development, trauma-informed therapy, and peer mentorship - services rooted in the lived experiences of our members. The result is a transformative program that promotes resilience, stability, and meaningful reintegration.

In 2025, Free Minds served **412 formerly incarcerated members** through our reentry programming. As a result of this comprehensive support, **90% of members were employed or enrolled in education or workforce training programs**, while **only 5% recidivated**.



412

members reentering society engaged in
our programming



90%

of members were employed, enrolled
in education or workforce training
programs



5% **recidivism
rate**

compared to an average of 60% of
individuals released from
DC Department of Corrections

Building Community and Healing Through Literature

At the heart of our reentry programming is **The Build Up**, our weekly virtual book club and writing workshop created and named by Free Minds members. During these sessions, members gather to read and discuss books, share poetry, exchange job leads, and provide mutual support as they navigate the challenges of returning home. In 2025, up to **190 members participated in The Build Up each week**, strengthening their social networks and building social capital through shared learning and community connection.

Each session also includes **"Tech Talk" segments** designed to build digital literacy by teaching essential skills such as managing email, handling attachments, and navigating Zoom meetings. These practical lessons help members develop the technological confidence necessary to succeed in today's workforce.

Recognizing the unique needs of younger members, in 2025 Free Minds created a dedicated space in the Build Up for **young adults**. Facilitated by emerging adult members alongside a social worker trained in positive youth development, the young adult book club provides a supportive environment where younger participants can discuss the week's reading, exchange resources, and receive age-appropriate social and emotional support.

Members also gather monthly in person for creating writing and sharing in a comfortable, affirming environment.

Together, these gatherings create a space where members rebuild confidence, strengthen their sense of belonging, and continue their personal and professional growth.



Every month, Free Minds members come together for Free Write, an in-person creative writing and sharing session in a supportive space.



Free Minds apprenticeship participants and staff pose together holding vision boards they created, reflecting personal goals, growth, and future aspirations during a hands-on workshop.

Job Readiness and Skill Building

Preparing members for sustainable employment is a cornerstone of the Reentry Book Club. In 2025, **44 members participated in our intensive week-long Job Readiness and Personal Skill Building Apprenticeship**, which equips participants with practical tools needed to thrive in the modern workplace.

The program offers hands-on training in workplace communication, conflict resolution, resume development, interview preparation, digital literacy, social media management, financial literacy, and budgeting. Members also learn how to complete online job applications and upload resumes using mobile devices—skills that are critical for navigating today's job market.

Free Minds uniquely integrates **reading and creative writing into workforce development**, using poetry and literature to strengthen critical thinking, communication, and self-expression. Apprentices read aloud from relevant texts and participate in guided writing exercises that encourage reflection and confidence-building.

Throughout the week, Free Minds members who are successfully employed share their experiences and career journeys, offering inspiration and practical advice. Apprentices also create **vision boards** outlining their goals and aspirations, presenting them to their peers and staff to practice public speaking and goal-setting. Following the apprenticeship, members continue to work one-on-one with reentry coaches to take steps towards their goals.

Free Minds continues to address systemic barriers to economic stability through our **Credit Builders Program**, a member-designed initiative that helps individuals returning from incarceration establish credit histories—an essential component of financial independence. Participants begin the program by receiving **\$300 in funding from Free Minds to open a secured credit card**, allowing them to begin building credit. Members then meet monthly with staff and peers to discuss challenges, share strategies, and celebrate progress as they work toward obtaining unsecured credit cards and increasing their credit limits.



A group of Free Minds members proudly hold certificates after completing a job readiness and apprenticeship program, standing together in a classroom and celebrating their achievement.

A highlight in 2025, Free Minds launched **Driving to Success**, a program designed to help members obtain learner's permits and driver's licenses. Access to reliable transportation significantly expands employment opportunities, particularly for worksites that are not accessible through public transit.

Members receive study guides, practice exams, and educational presentations based on official DMV resources. Reentry coaches also accompany members to DMV testing sites, providing encouragement and logistical support throughout the process. Sessions feature motivational talks from fellow members who have successfully obtained their licenses, reinforcing the program's message that every milestone represents progress toward independence.

Leadership Development and System Change

Free Minds members are not only rebuilding their lives—they are leading efforts to transform the systems that once impacted them. Through advocacy, coalition-building, and public leadership, members use their lived experience to push for policies that promote fairness, opportunity, and community safety.

Free Minds' **Peer Support Training Program** empowers members to use their lived experiences to guide others through the challenges of reentry. In 2025, we hosted **two Peer Support Training cohorts**, where participants received instruction in trauma-informed care, healthy boundaries, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and crisis response.

Graduates, known as **Peer Supporters**, are paired with newly released members and conduct weekly check-ins to provide emotional support, encouragement, and guidance. In 2025, **7 Peer Supporters regularly supported a caseload of 20 members newly home**, working closely with reentry staff to create a strong network of support rooted in trust and shared experience. Public graduation ceremonies celebrated the achievements of these leaders and highlighted the powerful impact of peer-led support within the Free Minds community.



Free Minds member Jordan joins fellow emerging adult leaders on a panel, sharing best practices and supports for emerging adults.

“I'm grateful that Free Minds provides me with opportunities to serve for two main reasons — one being able to give back. I like helping others and Free Minds gives me a way to do that easily. Secondly, it has given me skills along with confidence that I apply in my job. I get to practice communication, public speaking, organizing, logistics, and facilitation on a regular basis, and I'm now a manager and use these every day.”

- Free Minds Member and program facilitator Charles



Free Minds members, staff, and partners, as part of the "Our City, Our Say" campaign, educating policymakers and the public about the importance of DC autonomy.

In 2025, **101 members participated in our Changemakers program**, which supports individuals returning home who are committed to advocating for justice and equity for people impacted by incarceration. Changemakers participate in advocacy campaigns, contribute to policy discussions, and work alongside local and national partners to educate the public and policymakers about strategies, programs, and policies that improve outcomes for justice-impacted communities. Because this work can be emotionally demanding, Free Minds provides comprehensive support including leadership development training, professional coaching with reentry staff, and trauma-informed, healing-centered care. Through this network of support, members gain the tools and confidence needed to serve as effective advocates and community leaders.

Free Minds members also played a central leadership role in the **Thrive Under 25 Coalition**, a coalition sponsored by Free Minds that works to end punitive responses within DC's adult criminal legal system for individuals who entered the system before the age of 25. The coalition is led through a shared leadership structure consisting of **three directly impacted co-chairs, each paired with an emerging adult Free Minds member**, ensuring that those most affected by these policies guide the work.

In 2025, coalition members strengthened the organization and impact of **Thrive Under 25** by developing a comprehensive membership handbook that outlines membership guidelines, decision-making structures, coalition agreements, and election processes, creating a clear framework for sustainable coalition leadership.

Coalition members held **weekly leadership meetings and working group meetings and monthly coalition gatherings** with reentry organizations, public defenders, social workers, and justice reform advocates. They also testified at DC Council oversight hearings, organized rallies, and met with policymakers to advocate for meaningful reform. Through these collective efforts, members played a critical role in defending the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA) and Youth Rehabilitation Act (YRA) from legislative attacks.

In 2025, Free Minds also launched a new **Emerging Adult Cohort** within the coalition, designed to cultivate leadership among directly impacted young people ages 18–24. Five emerging adult leaders participated in weekly leadership meetings, rotated facilitation roles, and contributed to policy working groups—gaining hands-on experience in coalition building and advocacy leadership.

Voices Driving Justice Reform in DC

In response to increasing public debate around second look legislation, Free Minds also developed a new publication, **The Second Look Law: A Safer, Stronger DC**, highlighting the stories of 11 members who returned home through the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act and Second Look Amendment Act. Distributed to policymakers, attorneys, and community leaders, the booklet provides powerful firsthand accounts of transformation and leadership, illustrating how second look legislation strengthens both individuals and communities.

Through these advocacy efforts, Free Minds members are shaping the future of justice reform in Washington, DC. By centering the voices of those most directly impacted, Free Minds continues to cultivate leaders who are working to build a safer, more equitable community for all.



Shaping Public Understanding Through Storytelling

Free Minds members also use storytelling, poetry, and dialogue to build understanding between incarcerated individuals and the broader community. Through public education initiatives, members foster empathy, challenge misconceptions about incarceration, and inspire others to become part of the solution.

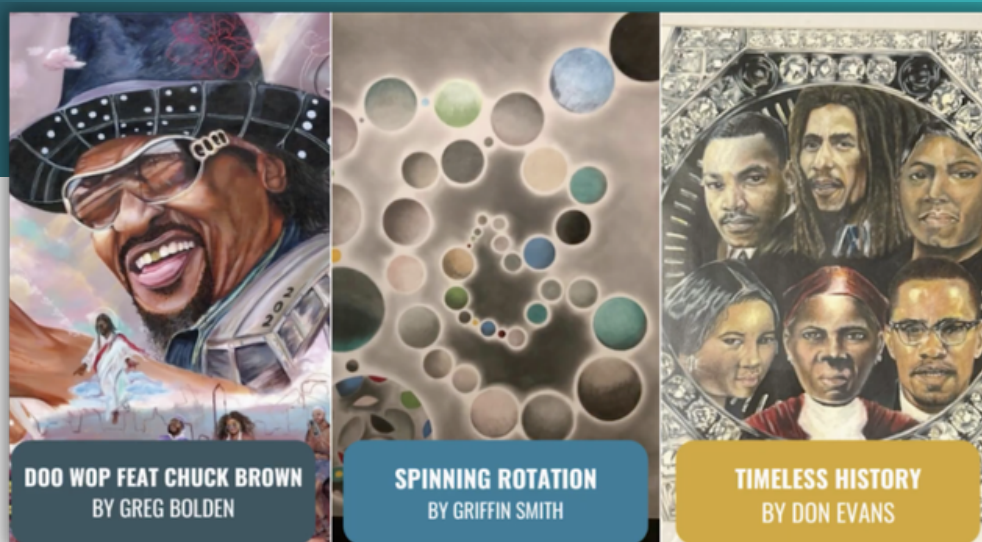
In 2025, **51 formerly incarcerated members served as Poet Ambassadors**, leading **115 On the Same Page community education events** with schools, corporations, and community organizations across the District. These events reached **more than 2,000 youth and adult volunteers**, creating opportunities for meaningful dialogue about justice, equity, and community safety.

During On the Same Page events, Poet Ambassadors share their personal journeys of incarceration, growth, and reentry. Participants then engage with poetry written by incarcerated Free Minds members reading their work, reflecting on its themes, and writing responses that are sent back to the poets. These messages of encouragement and support help combat the profound isolation of incarceration while building bridges between communities inside and outside prison walls.

The impact of these conversations is powerful: **90% of participants reported feeling motivated to learn more about or become involved in solutions addressing youth violence and criminal justice reform** after attending an event.



Free Minds members performing "Something We Can Build On," an original theatrical work created in partnership with the Theatre Lab's Life Stories project.



In 2025, Free Minds' innovative literary arts work received national recognition, affirming the power of our approach to healing and transformation through writing. Our model has been named a Best Practice in Literacy by the Library of Congress and honored with the Innovations in Reading Prize from the National Book Foundation.

We were also selected for the Kennedy Center's prestigious Culture Caucus, an initiative within its Social Impact department that uplifted exceptional, community-based creative programs across DC. As part of this recognition, Free Minds participated in a two-year residency and took the stage at the Kennedy Center's REACH Campus in March. In collaboration with Beauty Behind Bars, the event featured powerful poetry performances by our members, immersive art installations, and opportunities for attendees to engage directly with the voices of incarcerated writers.

This moment was more than a milestone, it was a powerful platform that elevated our members' voices on a national stage and reinforced the role of art as a catalyst for healing, connection, and lasting change.

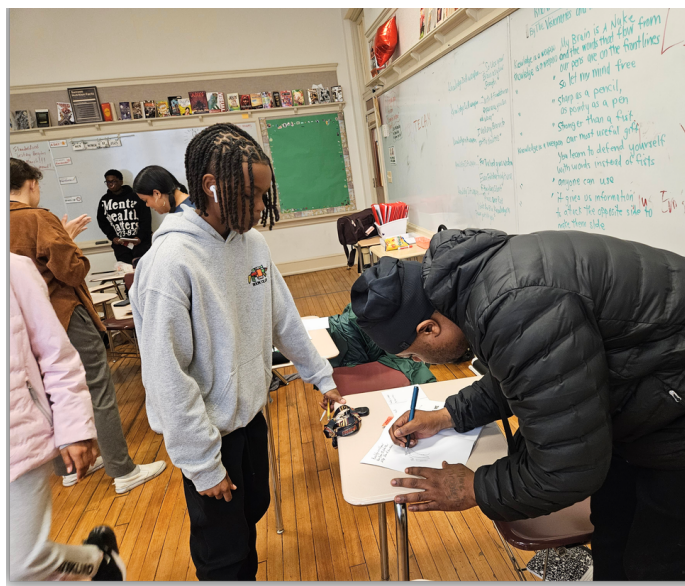
Free Minds members also continue to shape public understanding through storytelling and media engagement. Members shared their lived experiences in outlets including **The Washington Post**, **The Other Side of 16** podcast, **Politico**, and the **Power Station podcast**, helping audiences better understand the realities of incarceration, reentry, and the importance of second chances.

Through community education, storytelling, and the power of literature, Free Minds members are reshaping how people understand incarceration and reentry - building empathy, sparking dialogue, and strengthening the connections that make lasting change possible.

LOOKING AHEAD

As we look ahead, Free Minds remains deeply committed to serving incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth and adults with our innovative program model preparing our readers and writers to be positive forces for change in their own lives and in their communities. Building on the progress of this past year, from the growth of our Build Up reentry book club and leadership development initiatives to the expansion of financial stability and workforce readiness programs, we will continue to deepen the continuum of support that makes Free Minds unique.

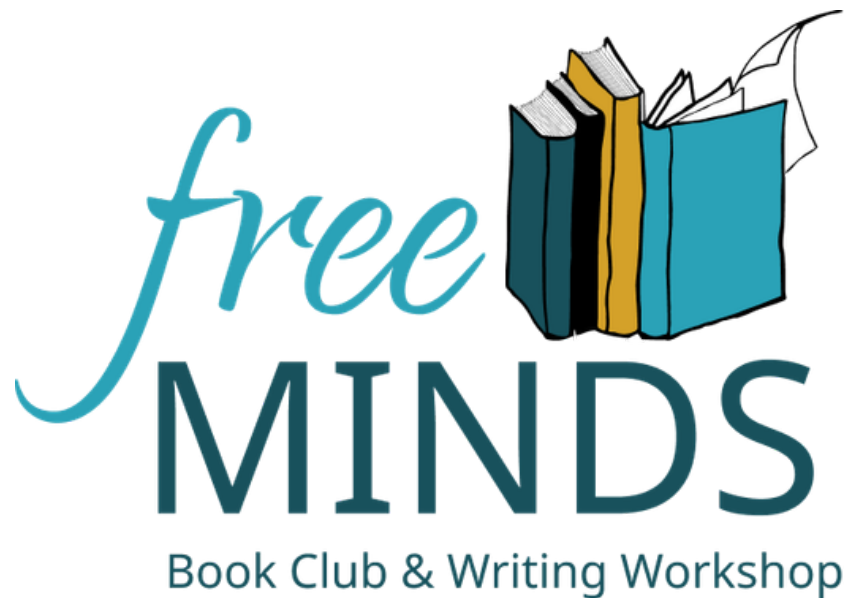
In the year ahead, we will further strengthen opportunities for members to develop as leaders, educators, and advocates within their communities through healing-centered support, therapeutic practices, and expanded educational offerings. Programs like the Peer Support Program, the Job Readiness and Personal Skill Building Apprenticeship, and the Thrive Under 25 Coalition will continue to empower members to use their lived experiences to mentor peers, shape public dialogue, and advocate for policies that create safer and more equitable communities.



A Free Minds Poet Ambassador signs books during a school outreach visit, turning personal experience into powerful storytelling that inspires and connects with the next generation.

Free Minds will also continue expanding practical pathways to stability and opportunity for members returning home. Initiatives such as our Credit Builders Program and Driving to Success will help members access the financial tools, transportation, and professional resources necessary to build sustainable careers and long-term independence.

Above all, we will continue to nurture our membership community centered around mutual support.



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