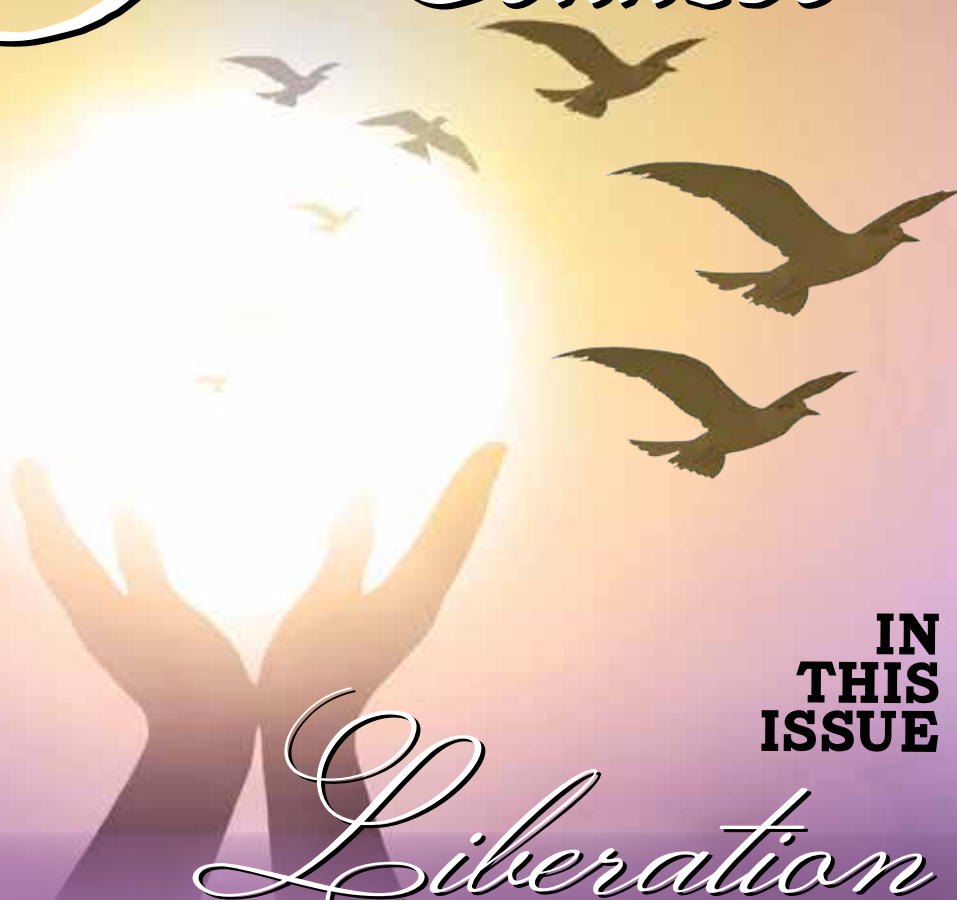


August/September 2024
Vol. 13, Issue 4

Free minds Connect



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THIS
ISSUE**

Liberation

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Greetings Free Minds Liberators,

I hope this issue of everyone's favorite magazine reaches you feeling healthy in all ways – and if not, I hope that immersing yourself in this issue brings connection and possibility! I say immerse rather than read as this issue's contents on the theme of liberation contains the full range of the emotional experience. We recently held a graduation ceremony for the latest cohort of our 12-week Peer Support Training Program, in which Free Minds members learned healing tools to support themselves and their fellow members walking together on the challenging path of reentry. I know you all serve in that role with so many others where you are right now. As Peer Support Specialist Craig said at the ceremony, "peer support is another term for Free Minds." It reminded me that we need each other for liberation to truly occur.

Free Minds visionary Glen was a liberator both on a personal level and a collective level, with a strong belief in collective liberation. He used his fierce love of books, writing, and learning to discover and dream of a world free from oppression for all. He did not get to see the fruits of his dreams in person, but I believe he knows what powerful liberatory forces he set in motion in Free Minds.

In his reentry profile interview on page 43, Cliff reinforces this idea. He says, *"to be really free means you got to change, got to rely on others sometimes, got to work together."* Cliff underscores that at the heart of liberation is community. A thriving community means being an engaged citizen and fighting for policies that result in fair justice for all. Rebecca's piece for the Write Way on page 28 gives us one key way to do this by writing letters to lawmakers. Full representation in government is a right that has been long denied to Washington, DC residents. Learn more about the call for statehood on page 34 as Sofia reminds us to be in solidarity together so all our voices are heard and DC residents can be full participants in democracy.

As always, this issue features a dynamic collection of writing by our members and friends, all of whom grapple with big questions of liberation, connection, and community. Larry describes how he found liberation driving freely around the DC area and getting to know all the new spaces and places (page 18). Free Minds member PM finds liberation through his body's movements on page 11, taking us along his daily journey of miles every day walking on the unit. He states, *"When I'm walking, I can walk away any stress I'm feeling. I push it right out of my body. I feel like I'm all alone on a deserted island with no care in the world. It feels so good!"*

Kelli's interview with BL on page 16 introduces us to the FREER Records project, which supports musicians behind the wall. BL shares her advice for embracing the liberatory power of the arts: be inspired by the stories you can find all around you. She says, *"Start a journal. Use all of it as inspiration. It might not be a song, but maybe it's a short story, or a poem, or a novel. Whatever. Just stay inspired. It is the only way to be free."*

MG writes on page 14 that *"The constant use of your mind, creates a freedom that can never be taken."* Carlos agrees, writing in our Spanish column on page 39, *"He sentido verdaderamente que en el proceso de mi liberación he encontrado paz mental. ¡Algo que no tiene precio es tener una liberación completa! I have truly felt that in the process of my liberation, I have found peace of mind. One thing that is priceless is having a complete liberation!"* MM writes a love letter to the world in his poem on page 15, as he envisions the liberation of all oppressed peoples across the globe.

Our wonderful intern Grace reminds us of Haiti's heroic freedom fighters during the Haitian revolution on page 36, and FM Newsman John marks the elections of women leaders in history, including Mexico's recent election of President Claudia Sheinbaum (page 30).

Finally, FM member MAR on page 35 sums up what I believe is a core element of any liberation movement: feeling seen, loved, and heard. In his essay on overcoming childhood trauma he writes, *"The opportunity to express some of our most intimate thoughts in the Free Minds Connect magazine... for some of us, it's the first time that we've felt loved, supported, and really heard."*

Thank you all for bringing your authentic selves to the ongoing work of liberation.

Until next time,

Tara

*May the long-time sun shine upon you
All love surround you
and the pure light within you guide your way on*

Next Issue's Theme: Community

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



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

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

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FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Sofia

Free Minds Community Gathers for the First In-Person Write Night Since 2020

This past July, Free Minds staff, members, and community members gathered to meet on the same page with our incarcerated members for our first in-person Write Night since pre-COVID. The gathering took place at the historic St. Mark's Episcopal church on Capitol Hill. In addition to Free Minds staff, there were about 20 reentry members in attendance, who sat dispersed amongst the audience of over 80 community members. Members and participants sat at tables conversing while leaving feedback on poetry written and sent in by Jail Book Club and Prison Book Club members, all of which has since been mailed back. Congressman John Lewis Fellow and Free Minds member Antoine performed his poem "Where I Belong," highlighting the impact of receiving poetry feedback from the community while incarcerated. The gathering was also an opportunity to present DC Councilmember Charles Allen with the inaugural Free Minds Glen McGinnis Community Changemaker Award. The award was presented to Councilmember Allen for his unwavering commitment to transformative justice and his role and ongoing support for the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA) which has enabled almost 200 Free Minds members (and counting!) to come home and be agents of change.

Local University Students Help Mail Poems to Free Minds Members

As local universities geared up for the start of their semester, first year students at Georgetown and George Washington Universities sought opportunities to connect to their new homes in DC, and what better place to do that than at Free Minds. Georgetown University returned to the Free Minds office for the second year in a row this past August as a part of their First-Year Orientation to Community Involvement (FOCI) program, where first year students spend their first few days in DC working together on service projects throughout the community. For their project at Free Minds, the students engaged in a conversation and poetry reading with Free Minds Poet Ambassadors and then mailed poems with feedback back to members from recent On the Same Page outreach events to 117 members! Just a few days later, George Washington University hosted Free Minds on their campus for their Welcome Day of Service, where the whole freshman class (over 2,500 students) participates in service projects. 60 students got to hear from Free Minds Poet Ambassadors and then left feedback on over 100 poems from members. These students also helped mail poems with feedback back to members. These students combined helped us get over 200 poems with feedback from the community back to our Prison Book Club members, getting to know DC through the eyes of Free Minds and connecting across the miles!

Free Minds Trip to Petersburg

Free Minds staff was recently invited to attend the annual reentry fair at FCI Petersburg Medium in Virginia. We've made this trip annually for several years now and always enjoy the opportunity to speak to Free Minds members and others at the facility participating in the reentry resource fair. We applaud everyone for being so proactive in preparing for reentry! We are deeply grateful to all of the participants for their time and energy.

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

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



FREE MINDS MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the April/ May 2024 Connect Me, Myself & I, and the June/July 2024 Connect Ancestors.

MM: I appreciate the news on the conflict and oppression of the people of the Congo that was due to greed for wealth in the Me, Myself & I Connect.

RBL: I want to send a thank you to everyone who contributed to the Me, Myself, and I issue. No lie, I read it cover to cover about 3 times. I really want to send a personal thanks to Jae-lynn. I thought I was the only one going through what was mentioned in the Did You Know: Mindfulness article. I have implemented the mindfulness practices that were suggested. I hope it works.

LS: Thank you for the book *Creatures of Passage*. I like it a lot. It's a very good read. I appreciate the love and support always and can't wait to receive the next thing you guys send me.

DW: The Free Minds family is special for all they do. I try to tell all the guys about it all the time and when I let them see the DC photos, it makes their day like they do mine. It will start a whole conversation about the photos. It's always a wonderful thing when something like a photo can have guys that don't even talk to each other having a conversation about something good.

Maji, Free Minds Friend: To Glen, the original Free Minder, the visionary, we never met before, but we are linked in forever. If you can see what your idea has blossomed into, you would be more than proud seeing how things are now. But if you're anything like me, I would expect that you would want a lot more to be done. Things do take time, but your vision has been fed with more ideas that's easily going to be accomplished in due time, especially with the right pieces in place.

QUOTE-I-VATOR

"When I liberate myself, I liberate others. If you don't speak out ain't nobody going to speak out for you."

– Fannie Lou Hamer, American activist



Cori Bush

'Freedom is not simply intended to mean freedom from enslavement. Freedom is an affirmative goal, it is one that promises liberation, safety, and peace of mind. It is the promise of a full, prosperous, and joyous life.'

– Cori Bush, U.S. Representative

"Painting what I experience, translating what I feel, is like a great liberation. But it is also work, self-examination, consciousness, criticism, struggle."

– Balthus, French artist

"I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change, I am changing the things I cannot accept."

– Angela Davis, American political activist and author (*Freedom Is A Constant Struggle, Are Prisons Obsolete?*)

"Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes."

– Mahatma Gandhi, Indian lawyer, politician, social activist, and writer

"The cost of liberty is less than the price of repression."

– W.E.B. Du Bois, American sociologist and a founding member of the NAACP

"If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

– Lilla Watson, Aboriginal elder, educator, and activist from Australia



JUST LAW: POWERED UP AND LIGHTING THE WAY WITH DC YOUTH ACT

Interview with FM member MH

By Tara

Youth Rehabilitation Act: Under D.C. Code § 24-901 et seq., a person less than 24 years of age (raised from 22 in 2018) who is convicted of a crime other than murder or serious sexual abuse, may be given the benefit of sentencing under this act. If discharged unconditionally prior to completion of probation, the conviction is automatically set aside by the court, § 24-906(a). If the sentence expires before unconditional discharge, the conviction may be set aside by the U.S. Parole Commission, in its discretion. § 24-906(b). As a non-conviction record, it is eligible for sealing under D.C. Code § 16-803.

Free Minds member MH was a recipient of DC's Youth Rehabilitation Act (YRA). He is now a Journeyman electrician, something he achieved after working on projects during the day and studying at night. I was able to catch up with MH on a short break from his latest job installing all of the electrical systems in a new college building in North Carolina. MH is managing electricians twice his age!

Q: MH, can you let us know a little bit about your childhood and your first charges?

I was raised by my grandmother as my mom had left DC. We lived in a neighborhood where a lot of negative things were going on. I had an older brother who I was really close to and looked up to. I liked going to school and learning. I first had gotten locked up as a juvenile in Arlington, Virginia and spent most of my time in the cell and didn't even get a chance for programming. When Maryland came and got me, I went to their juvenile center in Cheltenham. It was bad. I didn't get to go to school for the 10 or 11 months I was there. I was charged with unarmed strong arm robbery with stolen goods and ended up receiving a grand larceny charge. Because it was the juvenile system, when I made it back home, nothing showed up on my record, and I went back to high school and got my diploma. I lost my brother the same year I graduated. He was young when he was killed, and it really messed me up. I started carrying guns for protection, and that's when I received felonies on my record.

I was 19 years old when I first got locked up in the adult system. It was for a gun charge and since it was my first charge, I got straight probation for possession, but then just 72 hours later I was locked up again for the same charge! I did 2 years for carrying a weapon. I went to the Bureau of Prisons, and then when I got home, I was arrested again at age 21 for the same charge: possession of a firearm. I met a Free Minds member inside who told me about the book club and I joined. I'm so glad I did. I feel like I am part of a group that understands what I've been through and helps me get through all the stress of life.

Q: How did you get into the electrical field?

When I came home I went to a mass hiring event and I saw electricians. I looked at it like electricians make money and I need money! So that's why I signed up.

I became an apprentice electrician and it turns out I'm good at it. I like figuring things out and I learn best by actually doing it; I could do that on the jobs I was sent to. I had a lot of people with experience helping me, telling me over and over what to do and I just repetitively did it. I realized if I do it with my hands I'm going to remember. I remember exactly what I told the interviewers when they asked, "why should we hire you?" I said, "I'm brand new at this so I don't have any bad habits to break, and I love to learn." I think that line "I love to learn" got me the job.

Q: That's awesome. From knowing you I know you really do love to learn! Now you're on a job site supervising other electricians double your age. Can you tell us how you got this far?

A big part of it I think is how I communicate. I knew all my actions had to match my words. I always say this: "you can't say you're dependable and then you're late." You have to prove to an employer that whatever statistic they have about you is incorrect. In the beginning, they didn't quite know how to react to me because I'm a quiet person and not so talkative, but then they saw how hard I

worked and how much drive and initiative I have. I told a dude I was working under, "I'm going to have your job." He didn't like it but it was the truth, and now I'm supervising a site in North Carolina. I speak up and suggest solutions at the workplace and they saw that.

Q: Wow, you really put a lot of dedication in – having to work all day on the job site then taking classes and studying at night to be what you are now, a Journeyman Electrician. How did you keep that focus?

The way I am is, give me a task and I'm going to take it to heart. I had the end goal so I just kept it in my mind. I'm not gonna lie, it wasn't easy. But like I said, I wanted a career where I would always have work and could make a good salary. I like nice things and now I can have them.

I was an Apprentice for 4 years and had to go to class and learn electrician work plus study. I worked from 7 am to 3:30 pm and then from 5 pm to 9 pm I went to school. I kept thinking if I keep following the rainbow there's got to be gold at the end. Now I'm a licensed electrician and legally able to work on any electrical system, whether it's an apartment building, condos, hotels, dorms, or office buildings. I worked on one of the old DC Metro transit buildings that they gutted and turned into office space.

Q: You are a recipient of DC's 2018 revised Youth Rehabilitation Act or YRA law, which states that if you are under the age of 25 at the time of your conviction you can apply to have your record set aside once you successfully complete probation. How did

receiving the Youth Act benefit you?

First, I want to thank Free Minds for letting me know about the new law and helping me apply for it. The Youth Act has made a very big difference in my life and career. Having nothing show up when anyone runs my background check opens a whole world that was cut off to me. Now there aren't any work sites that are off limits. I can be part of any job – residential, high security, etc. If my record showed up, that wouldn't be possible. I was selected to leave DC on my own and work at a residential dormitory on a college campus in another state. I would not have been able to do this without receiving the Youth Act. I'm saving up my money for my own place and I can more easily obtain a mortgage. Now I have real choices because of the Youth Act. There's so many doors open to me now that were just shut before. I know there are so many other benefits that aren't coming to my head right now, but the most important is, it's a good feeling!

Q: Final question: What advice would you give to Free Minds members who might be eligible for the Youth Act, and for members entering the workforce when they come home?

Follow all the conditions of supervision and get off early! This way you can apply for a Youth Act set aside and get that early too. Keep in touch with your PO. Communication is key. Do what you're supposed to do and they will see that. For the workforce, know that you have been in a lot of situations inside and have had to read people, and that skill will be very useful on the job. The practicalities of a job you can always learn. It's the people skills that are the most important and you already have them.

CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- ★ ADO, BT, DAA, DN, DPA, JD, JB, JOJ, JW, KG, RH graduated from high school.
- ★ AHD graduated from the McCullough Construction Program.
- ★ AHD, HR and LW got their Driver's License.
- ★ BB writing piece was featured in the latest issue of the Poets & Writers magazine.
- ★ CL, GD, and LEC received the NAARC/MORCA Award.
- ★ CY earned his CDL (Commercial Driver License).
- ★ GA is a few credits away from obtaining his AA degree in Entrepreneurial Management.
- ★ EMG, KT and LF graduated from the 4-week READY Center DOES training program.
- ★ MST was promoted to a supervisory position.
- ★ RLE got accepted to DC Central Kitchen.

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!

SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLISHED AUTHOR

Many of our Free Minds members have published books and we'd like to celebrate their accomplishments! If you have published a book, please send us the title and a short description that we can print in an upcoming issue of the Connect. All books must be available in paperback on Amazon.com. Free Minds will not list books that include explicit sexual material, gratuitous violence, or discrimination against any group of people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, or disability.

100 Ways to Make Money Legally by Baby Auk

Description provided by the author: This booklet is the cure to being broke. It's a lot of people in prison who want to see someone sink while knowing they have the power to help them.

FAMILY TIES

Interview by Grace

Grace, our Prison Book Club intern, is joined by Gregory, a Free Minds member to talk about his experience maintaining familial connections while incarcerated and reconnecting with his now wife.

GRACE: Greg, what was your relationship like with your family before incarceration?

GREG: It was strained, due to selfish reasons and a lot of them passed away while I was incarcerated.

GRACE: Which family members were you in contact with?

GREG: My mom, we were really close, like Bonnie and Clyde. She was my ride or die, my rock, my heart. We had a loving, beautiful mother-son relationship. I mean, my siblings had different relationships with her, but that was my baby, my everything.

I used to call her every day, send letters, cards, and pictures. She fell ill, though. She had been heavily addicted to drugs earlier in her life, and that took a toll on her health. She had diabetes, high blood pressure, and, after years of drug use, her body started breaking down. But she chose to prioritize her health over the drugs. After she passed, I learned that she had a few open-heart surgeries, she didn't want to worry me. She fought hard, hoping to live long enough to see me free, but unfortunately, that didn't happen. She passed in 2017.

GRACE: I'm so sorry to hear that. It must've been difficult being away from her during that time.

GREG: Yeah, it was tough. As a kid, I didn't understand the situation. Sometimes she had to choose between feeding us or feeding her habit, and, more often than not, we were on the losing end. As a child, I was angry, but I couldn't articulate what was happening. All I knew was my mom was struggling, and I didn't want her doing what she was doing. It took me getting older to really empathize with her situation.

GRACE: I can imagine that realization must've been hard.

GREG: Yeah, for sure. I had to educate myself – reading mental health and addiction literature. I sold drugs for survival back then, and I remember a heated argument we had about her drug use. In the middle of it, she said something that stuck with me: "We're both addicted to drugs. You're just selling them, and I'm using them." At the time, I didn't fully get it because we were both heated, but later, I realized she was right. Even though I benefited financially from selling, it was still an addiction. Money can be an addiction too.

She was right about it all. Coming up in the environment I was raised in, I didn't really have a choice. Survival was the priority, We didn't have much. My mom was on welfare and had her habit, and my brother and sister didn't live with us. But you still need things – clothes, food – you want stuff, you know? You don't want to be the one without. I ended up becoming the man of the house because bills had to be paid, and my mom was doing what she could with her little money and food stamps. But it wasn't enough. So, I had to do something. Trying to find a job, trying to fit into society, trying to be accepted while finding your own identity – it's tough. So you end up following what seems cool at the time.

GRACE: And how long have you been home and how are you adjusting to it?

GREG: I came home on July 29, 2022, and this year marked my second anniversary. I've adjusted well, because I have an amazing support system. My wife, my kids, my employers, they all genuinely want to see me succeed. I surround myself with people who want the best for me and want me to grow, so I can be a better person and mentor others.

GRACE: That's so inspiring. Could you talk a little bit about your wife and family?

GREG: Yeah, my daughter is 11. My wife, Tiffany, is an incredible person. We had a relationship in high school, and then we reconnected. Around my 12th year of incarceration, a friend of mine showed me a photo album, and I saw Tiffany in it. It turns out he knew her. So, a few days later, he gave me her phone number. After I got her number, we've been inseparable ever since.

GRACE: That's an amazing story! It really sounds like fate or the universe brought you two back together.

GREG: Yeah, someone was definitely bringing us together. We never had any issues in our relationship; we were just young teenagers doing our thing. Time passed, and life happened – she had her life, I had mine. But once we came back together, we reconnected and really built a solid friendship. We talked about everything, being completely honest with each other – good, bad, or indifferent. I'm so grateful for her.

GRACE: What is it about her that really stood out to you during this journey?

GREG: She's one of the most consistent, loving, patient, and nurturing people I know. She really is amazing. She basically became incarcerated with me, just because of her love for me. She's a beautiful, smart, and successful woman – didn't need a man for anything, except maybe companionship. But despite all that, she chose me. Not only did she visit, but for about four or five years, I had one to two visits from her every week. She was making that trip every weekend. She came to visit me from DC to Winton, North Carolina. It's a long trip, but she made it.

GRACE: What advice would you give to others on maintaining family ties during incarceration?

GREG: To be patient with your family members. Even though they're free physically, many people on the outside are mentally incarcerated, too. Appreciate everything they do. Sometimes, it's not about the money or material things; it's the phone calls, the letters, the pictures, and the books that mean the most.

GRACE: That's great advice. What would you suggest for someone who doesn't have family to reach out to?

GREG: I'd say make friends. A lot of times, friends become your family. During my incarceration, I made connections with people who are like blood brothers to me now. It's about nurturing those relationships. Be a person of substance, become a quality person, and that will attract the right people to you.

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!

Advice Man T.S. has been in transit between facilities, so Antoine offered to step in with his perspective!

Dear Advice Man,

I am about to be sentenced to time in the BOP. I would like very much to pursue getting one or more pen pals to write to during my time. I want to be sure that I go about it in the right way though. I know that sometimes people who are incarcerated can cross boundaries in a pen pal relationship and in doing so, ruin what could otherwise have been a fruitful and good friendship. How would you advise me to go about seeking a pen pal, and what are the rules or guidelines I should abide by to make sure that the experience is healthy and good for everyone involved?

Sincerely,
IL

Thank you for asking such a great question. Your inquiry into pen pals and the parameters around something so unpredictable, but yet and still can turn out to be something special is interesting. I say that because most who are faced with the reality of serving some considerable time behind bars are more likely to be thinking about the relationships that will be lost as opposed to the ones that can be built. So again, I commend you for your proactive and mature approach to securing some companionship/friendship at the beginning of your sentence, where support can be vital in the direction you choose to go in, with every prison obstacle in mind. A pen pal is definitely not a bad idea under those circumstances!

Having someone genuinely to communicate with can be the major difference in how a person comes home. It is unfortunate for a lot of us who were arrested as we all learned that harsh reality – Even the people you took care of, kinfolk included, who tend to forget about us no sooner they snapped the handcuffs on! That alone could ignite a sense of bitterness and resentment that could be poisonous to a spirit already in need of healing. So again, being proactive in regards to securing a pen pal as soon as possible, could actually turn out to be a great idea.

Having served 22 years myself, I took a couple swings at pen pal services. I have mixed reviews about it. Can you meet someone good? Absolutely. Can you meet someone you'd rather not communicate with? That's true too. I believe the biggest thing going into building a relationship with a pen pal is expectation. Yours and your potential pen pals'. Going into it knowing exactly what you want out of the correspondence is essential as with knowing what your pen pal is seeking also. That part is very important because at times, in light of our circumstances, our needs may feel even more dire, and we might not always be aware that there is another person in this and they may actually be going through a lot themselves. Basically, you would want to be as reliable and consistent as you desire your pen pals to be. Even if that person may not be the one for you, they clearly have something they wish to fulfill within themselves if they have indeed reached out (in this case, reached in) to someone behind the wall. It could be a myriad of reasons: duty, loneliness, empathy or any number of reasons. And not all of them are

favorable to you. So you definitely have to be careful! Not to worry you, but it's just something to keep in mind when connecting with your pen pal.

A strong desire for companionship, friendship is a reminder that we still have a heart, in spite of our situation. And those deep feelings of loneliness in general can be tough for anyone. But for those behind the wall it is even tougher. But again, there is another person in the equation and having a clear understanding as far as what you both are seeking in one another should be established as early as possible. Trust is the foundation. The last thing anyone needs is to be misled or hurt as prison itself is already one big dysfunctional relationship! Simply put: When seeking out a potential pen pal, be sure to protect yourself at all times. We are so vulnerable in there, at the same time, it can be very difficult to rely on someone for any support... emotional or otherwise. My advice is to use the time to become the best version of yourself... Your positive energy will attract everything you need, including the right pen pal! If you are interested in corresponding with a pen pal, let us know and we can mail you the National Prison Resource List. Some pen pal organizations have a waitlist, so be sure to keep that in mind if you are not matched with a pen pal immediately after you sign up to receive one.

Here are some pen pal organizations to check out:

IAHR PEN PAL PROGRAM

PO Box 9731
Arlington, VA 22219
Offers pen pals program for D.C. residents

LIBERATION PRISON PROJECT

P.O. Box 33036, Raleigh, NC 27636
Tel: 919-817-8385
infousa@liberationprisonproject.org
Offers Buddhist pen pals, correspondence courses and spiritual resources for the study of Tibetan Buddhism.

BLACK AND PINK, NATIONAL OFFICE

2406 Fowler Ave, Ste 316, Omaha, NE 68111
www.blackandpink.org
Tel: 531-466-3346
admin@blackandpink.org
An open family of LGBTQ and/or HIV+ prisoners and "free world" allies who support each other. B&P also provides a free non-romantic pen pal program.

ADOPTAN INMATE

P.O. Box 1543, Veneta, OR 97487
http://adoptaninmate.org
Tel: 971-236-7897
Accepts applications from people on the outside and matches them with people in prison with similar backgrounds and interests.

MEMBERS *CONNECT*: LIBERATION

Reflection on Freedom By KC

Freedom to me is being able to embrace the sharpness of my ears. The deepness of my mind, to be able to be strong enough to endure this Modern Day Slavery Pressure of the inhumane disgrace of the spirit of a whole thoroughbred warrior. The freedom to continue to train my mind, body, soul, spirit and emotions, to focus and strengthen my power, self respect, self discipline, self awareness, and to humble my spirit. While having the courage to accept the **here** and **now** of clarifying the perception of what I want out of my own life. Just being able to choose to make a choice of living to the fullest by living with no Regrets. Living with no Regrets is a Freedom that can't and will not be tamed: This is the **meaning** of my **freedom**. Live with no Regrets is Freedom to me.

Free Minds By JL

"Free" Minds is befitting for a book club that pretty much seeks for its members to freely express themselves and share their ideas through writing. All in an effort to help liberate our minds by sharing ideas, plus sharing how we feel about certain issues in life. This can help members grow as individuals and in the collective sense. On a broader scale, I believe that all people should have the opportunity to express their likes, dislikes, ideas, fears, reasons for certain hatred, etc. in order to bring any negative opinions plaguing their mind to the surface. Then maybe we all can engage in a collective understanding of sorts – liberating our minds by discovering that our problems, issues, and desire for a better life are not that different, thus, the proper solution may not be different. Through sharing our thoughts we gain a broader perspective of life which can liberate our minds from the negativity we take in and feel daily.

Liberation... By HW

What does liberation mean to me?

From the dictionary:

Liberty – (1) the state of not being in confinement or servitude, emancipation, freedom, liberation, manumission. (2) Departure from normal rules or procedures: Freedom.

Liberation – the act of liberating: the state of being liberated, of being free.

Liberation – Some may think liberation is being free from prison. Some may think it's being free (as teenagers) from their parents. Others (adults) may think it's being free of their spouse. To me, liberation is being free from all the hard times of life, all the negative energy that keeps you depressed, overwhelmed, and unable to move forward with your dreams. Liberation is a freedom of the conscious soul! A freedom that newborns and toddlers have in life before all the responsibilities kick in. The feeling of being free and loved and comfortable. To know that you're happy, successful, fulfilled and loved. Like me, some people feel this way when it comes to spirituality. Others feel this when they're rich but truly it's only a fulfillment of greed. You don't have to be rich to be happy, successful, or to feel fulfilled and loved. As long as you're happy, successful, fulfilled and loved mentally: you are liberated.

But what about being liberated in a collective sense? As a whole? A nation? A people or race? As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Or, as the civil rights leader Fannie Lou Haner said, "Nobody's free until everybody's free." What do they mean by that? Simply put; think of the unfairness you feel or a person feels while being incarcerated under laws that don't make sense compared to our country's Constitution. It feels like we were lied to, like our government didn't uphold their part of the deal

pertaining to their oath to uphold and honor the Constitution. Like they committed genocide, or worse, treason. But on a better standpoint, think of how our families, our significant others, or our neighbors and/or community think of us when we cause mischief in our household or neighborhood. Didn't we make them distrust us? Didn't we take away their sense of feeling safe, happy or loved?... YES!

When we cause this heretofore mentioned mischief, we are not thinking of others' feelings. We only think of ourselves. Which is, in a sense of saying, SELFISH! Selfish towards our wife/husband, kids, family, and our community. Even selfish (which might sound crazy, but is true) towards ourselves for not actually living a happy, peaceful and caring life. So isn't that restricting your and others' sense of liberation?

Since my vacation time of being incarcerated, I've come to the conclusion that if I want to be liberated, that I MUST CHANGE MY WAYS FOR THE BETTER! I must first spiritually liberate myself; and as above, so below; I must physically liberate myself in my own actions. Second, I must teach my kids this form of liberation and make amends with my wife and family. Third, after tending to myself and my family, I must teach this form of liberation to my neighbors and community. Then last, but not least, I must teach this form of liberation to my state, country, nation, and strive to teach it internationally. For as a whole, as a single race (Human Beings) we shall be liberated!

There shall be no more selfish, greedy thoughts. Malicious acts towards others. Or spiritual restraint towards ourselves or others. For the opposite of these three things does nothing but cause negative energy and hinder yourself and others from true liberation.

MEMBERS CONNECT: LIBERATION

Walking to Freedom By PM

"Freedom!!!" There are plenty of forms of freedom and plenty of ways to define freedom. When I used to hear the word "freedom," in my mind I would picture birds flying freely around in the sky at will and doing as they please. I used to picture clouds, flowers, butterflies and heavenly figures.

I am currently incarcerated and have been for the past seven years. Throughout those seven years, my definition and imagination of "freedom" has changed. I have witnessed "freedom" in many different aspects, such as drawing, arts and crafts, music, poetry, reading, meditation, etc. But of all the ways I've experienced freedom, there is one that I seemed to gravitate to more than the others. And that form is walking.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we were locked down for 420 days straight! When the lockdowns were gradually lifted, I started walking to get the rust off my bones from sitting around for so long!

I walk laps around the common area of my unit. To be honest, I've never taken the time to count how many laps I do, but trust me that it is a big number! Overall, I walk six hours a day split between into two three-hour segments during our rec time. I cut back on watching TV, playing tabletops (cards, chess, checkers, Uno, etc.) and sitting around. Instead, I walk. It has made my time seem to go faster. It also makes me feel closer to freedom. Whenever I can take my mind off being incarcerated, I'm free! Walking has been my distraction from all the craziness that transpires in the jail environment. When I'm walking, I'm minding my business and staying out of trouble.

Yes, walking six hours a day has been great to me. But all the walking I do comes with a painful price to my legs and feet. At the end of

each day, I have to soak my feet in a bowl of hot shampoo water. Of course, we don't have bowls big enough for our feet to sit, so I clean my toilet out and fill it with the hot shampoo water and use that. It sounds crazy, but it works. I only miss a day if I'm fully incapacitated. Otherwise, I push my body to the limit. Sometimes my feet hurt so bad that I don't want to walk the next day, but I walk on for the sake of my freedom!

When I'm walking, I can walk away any stress I'm feeling. I push it right out of my body. I feel like I'm all alone on a deserted island with no care in the world. It feels so good!

I listen to music while I walk. My favorite types of music are rap, R&B and hip hop. So, you might think I listen to that when I walk. I don't. My walking music includes classical masters like Beethoven, Bach and Schubert! Sometimes I walk to meditation recordings, including ocean waves, rain, and I practice mindfulness breathing. These are peaceful and work wonderfully for my mind. The music also makes walking easier and takes my mind off the pain I sometimes feel in my feet.

When I walk, I think about my family, my five kids, my relationship, the people I've lost, the plans I have for my career, and what my life will look like when I come home. Sometimes I have so many emotions and thoughts at once, I have to slow down, because it feels like my legs seem to power my brain!

I honestly feel free when I walk. Remember, just because you're not free, doesn't mean that you can't experience freedom. I hope this will inspire others everywhere on their journey. Look for ways that you can liberate yourself. Incarcerated or not, we all deserve freedom!

Where is my Black Pen? By Maji, Free Minds Friend

Sitting down at my desk, I'm looking for my black pen, searching through the spots where I usually keep my pens and becoming frustrated because it's like all my pens somehow disappeared.

"Man, where the hell is my black pen?" I said loudly to myself as I kept digging through the mess I already made. Realizing I never looked under my mattress, I lifted up my mattress to find the black pen sitting there. I take it and go back to the desk to fill out the form but as I try to write about the events that took place...I couldn't. I sat there stuck even though I had all I wanted to write lined up in my mind, I just couldn't put it to paper. Then sitting next to the form was the book I was currently reading at that time. *Thomas Sankara Speaks* by Thomas Sankara, a collection of essays and speeches by Thomas Sankara who was instrumental in helping the African country Burkina Faso (formerly known as Upper Volta) gain its independence from French colonizers back in the mid-1980s. Perceived as a revolutionary, he took his pen and penned political orientations to rebuild a country that was torn by poverty and corruption from the former government. It was at that moment I became agitated, not because I had some form of a writer's block going on but seeing that the same black pen I was using to write down a complaint, was once used to liberate a country from the social ills of colonialism. The thought alone made me reflect back to all those who ever sat down like I was and took the same instrument I had in my hand and wrote down words that would become the fabric of what our generation is today.

Historical figures like Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X, who took it upon themselves to pen their own life story. One man would write about his struggles becoming an abolitionist and how at one point in time it was illegal in his days for black people to learn how to read and write. (So you telling me that he was putting his life in danger just to make sure his story got told). While the other man wrote his story with his life being in danger and all he wanted to do was tell his truth. I wonder if they had a black pen in hand when they first wrote down their ideas to what would become a generational moment for the both of them. From poets like Maya Angelou when she wrote "Caged Bird", I don't know if she knew that using her pen to write this beautiful piece, that her words would travel around the world translated in many different languages.

So I really can't sit here and allow myself to waste time writing about something that would be deemed irrelevant. The only person I'm going to hurt is me at the end. I feel like in this lifetime, in order for the next generation to have a connection to what was going on today, I need to take my black pen and write about all that I've been through especially when dealing with an inadequate carceral system. In hopes that it can liberate one from a life of crime and violence. When I write, I know it's not about me, I'm here to serve others. When I write, FREEDOM flows through my body knowing that even though I'm in a prison cell, my words can still be heard around the world. How liberating it will feel for just one person to come to me and say that something I wrote down with a black pen became an inspiration for them.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Autumn Winds

By MS

Autumn winds play here on the Cusp of Memories,
Floral rainbows bespeak childhood bouts of wonder...
Giggles of pleasure muffled by the sweetness of innocence of
imagination at play
"London Bridge Is Falling Down" ...
The tune still lingers in the air,
As leaves float back to the earth,
My tiny hands grasping more leaves to throw into the spaces up above
Between me and the trees, giggling sing songy...
"London Bridge Is Falling Down" ...
My small form crashing down to the Earth, happily spent, gazing
up in wonder
Leaves waving as the Autumn wind plays here,
Looking at the floral rainbows
Here at the Cusp of memory...
I am Free here...
For me, this is Liberation.

Finally Free...

By RB

Finally Free!

Free from Oppression
Free from Depression

Finally Free

Free from chains
Free from pain

Finally Free

Free physically
Free mentally

But what does it mean to be truly Free?
Am I free if all the damage is still within ME?

Who is really Free?
When all the powers that be are still controlling thee?

Being Free is a Hell of a thing!
To be able to fully sing just to sing,
To be able to breathe the freshest breeze,
To go where one want to go,
To move as fluid as traffic flows,

Who at last can say I am finally Free?

I pray one day that will be me.

Uplift Us

By CMK

I vow to lift my people up
Not by luck, but the true might of the good book
New law in DC is freeing us
Shoutout to the 2nd look
Everything I have learned couldn't come from a book
Sad to say the corner street crook is where I learned how to smile and cook
Now I use the negatives for a positive to show my people this is my
new way to write a hook
Winners are the ones we called losers, now I'm part of that same look.

Liberation

By JS

I desire to be liberated,
I wait,
being patient as I pray for liberation
I needed to be resuscitated, so I pray because the time left my body vacant
I work to bring myself back to life
because when I became shackled, I lost a part of my life,
the other part left through the tears I never cried.

The possibility of liberation seeks to bring me back to life,
I can't live with half a mind, half a heart, or half a body,
So I work to liberate myself mentally, as I wait for a liberation of my body.
For years I walked around controlled by instant gratification
resembling something of a zombie, a living reincarnation of the
walking dead,
some say it was a condition that led me to fail,
to be in need of this liberation,
the very thing that has me praying,
waiting as I learn to be patient.

I say everything was my growth in the making,
it was Allah's plan to have me truly liberated from chasing an allusion
masquerading as a dream,
to challenging the things I really need, before not valuing anything in truth
more than the money.
Now I value me just as much as anything,
now I am free, I am almost complete,
I just need the final step,
to be liberated.

Liberation

by MW

Liberation and its essence,
such an empowering thought...
In blood, sweat and tears,
a better future we were told we had bought...
But for that to happen
so much change is needed to come...
Especially how we raise up our kids,
'cause now school supplies is more expensive than a gun...
Reparation are needed,
to level the playing field...
And criminal justice reform,
what an unjust sword the DOJ wields...
Too many fathers,
disappearing for conspiracy & hearsay...
Inflicted on generations of my people,
mass kidnappings of young men everyday...
On that note,
we rise up and take care of the family tree...
Now we understand Fannie Lou Hamer's quote,
"Nobody's free until everybody's free..."

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

My Love Letter to the World

By RW

Liberate my soul early one morning after being awakened
from the thunder, lightning and heavy rain.

Mystique the sun starts to rise, sparkling and
refulgent, smiling at everyone.

Attracting a beautiful orange and black monarch
butterfly that's very salacious.

Absconded out of the clear blue azure sky landing on
a yellow and green dandelion flower.

Neatly outlined along in columns succulent fertilizing
the landscape.

How amiable I am to become domesticated and how
tangible it is for me to communicate with the world.

My mind is finally free, energized and formative, easy
to be examined.

And yet... absolved to travel around the universe
creating visuals in my head, romanticizing exotic islands.

We receive positive energy from the sun.

I'm addicted to affinity dreams that replenish the
mind, body, and spirit.

Dreams are natural occurrences that affect us like
storms appear without warning to prosper our habitat.

Although prison has impaired my soul and after the
thunder, lightning, and heavy rain has cleared
I turned 50 years old.

Oh... how much I have healed and how priceless the cost.

Consciously, I found my purpose from being lost in this dark cave.

Now I have the strength along with enthusiasm to smile.

Through dialogue, reading memoirs I have gained
wisdom, knowledge and patience.

I will ameliorate my imagination bring my dreams
into existence.

Understanding that tomorrow might not ever come
If the stars are not aligned to glisten the moon.

I have the power to let go.

It's expected to have hope the world will soon grow with felicity.

Tomorrow will shine forever... Liberate my soul in the
Morning.

Trapped in a Cloud

By ER

The burdens of this nebulous world are too harsh to conceive.
Tension applies pressure from all sides, making it impossible to breathe.

It's suffocating how their sense of justice has afforded me nothing but plight.
The irony isn't lost on me that I am held captive where the eagle
soars and free birds take flight.

Relegated to inequitable social footing, with my economic rights
entangled in a perpetual mist.
Not every enemy conveniently tangible, nor bondage necessarily
accompanied with manacled wrists.

Entombed in a blinding fog. Is this to be my endless purgatory?
To hold these truths to be self-evident?
The concept of freedom seems to be reserved for only those of
another category.

The rain helps to disguise the tears and the melancholy cries of the
oppressed, despised, and marginalized.
Agonizing in this murky prison, I'm forced to realize the role I
played in my own suffering and fettered demise.

Coming to terms with such flaws permits me to learn from my
mistakes and resist with newfound inspiration.
It's safe to smile knowing each sunrise produces rays of hope to
melt away these chains and give me a chance at liberation.

Not At Liberty by KW

Born into Labels

Labels that Dispute my Purpose of Being,
Labels that Classify by Being for Servitude,
Being for Servitude, roots me into,
Fields of Disqualification:

Civil Rights...Disqualify!

Equal Opportunity...Disqualify!

Realistic Healthcare...Disqualify!

Reparations...Disqualify!!!

This Black Skin,

is not,

at liberty to Choose,

Its own Labels...

"BECAUSE"

This Black Skin is not AT Liberty yet.

59 years.

Septima Clarke, Bernice Robinson, and Esau Jenkins.

For 59 years we qualify to vote.

Not counting the 7 years those three spent,

Educating with Hope that,

One day,

This Black skin will be AT Liberty to Enjoy Freedom.

Freedom that doesn't Fluctuate,

Freedom that doesn't Bend,

Freedom that only Liberates

This Black Skin.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

What Freedom Means to Me

By MG

Freedom to me transcends the physical
A body bound by chains, buried in a dismal crypt
Is still capable of being free
As long as it is not mentally bound

For example, my being incarcerated
Has forced me to focus on what matters to me
I refuse to allow my mind to deteriorate from stagnation
No matter if I'm in total isolation
Bars and windows sealed shut,
My mind and spirit roams free
As the mighty eagle flying on a strong wind
Headed in any direction that suits its fancy.

Bondage is a state of mind,
You can only be bound if you allow yourself to be.
Imagine attempting to catch a breeze in a bottle,
No matter how big the bottle is,
It will prove to be an impossible feat.

I've been in situations where I was in shackles
And cuffs bolted to a concrete slab for days at a time
And the entire time, I continuously recited maxims I memorized
From Friedrich Nietzsche, allowing my mind to roam freely
Despite the physical bondage I was placed in.

The constant use of your mind
Creates a freedom that can never be taken,
Again it is on the person to find that freedom
The worst type of bondage is the mental.

People who have never visited the inside of a cell
Are sometimes mentally enslaved,
It's a common occurrence, because they mistake
The fact of being able to move as they wish as freedom,
But don't realize that they are enslaved to everyday life
The hustle and bustle of constantly just working a job,
Paying bills, or raising a family, etc.

They think this is all life has in store
After the indoctrination of society.
The thoughts are the cause of it all,
How you think determines how life will be.
Think free, live free.

Liberation

by RNM

Liberation, is Destiny
like climbing Mount Everest
It is the conclusion one reaches
suffering through painful advances
from jagged edges - dented - depressed - deep valleys
to arrive at one's integrity - honesty - unconditional belief,
From the wisdom that not one living person outside
of yourself can give you liberation.
God did not empower no men/women
with the fruit of this tree in this
or any other reality.
Reach for your liberation wisely and
divinely

Liberated (Spoken Word)

by LA

The notion of freedom in even the simplest sense,
fuels a fire in me... it ignites in me...
An unwavering kind of strength
A strength that allows me to see beyond
Any negative circumstance or condition of confinement
And whether that be mentally or physically,
This deeply embedded will in me,
Allows me to override any form of oppression
Regression, depression, abuse or neglect!
It allows me to protect my dreams
like a newborn child, all the while watching it mature
like a withering plant into a gracious and vivacious tree
when watered with love that is...
The very thought of freedom exudes a feeling over me,
one that's unexplainable yet exhilarating to say the least
It shifts anomalies, paradigms, and mental roadblocks
that's been designed to leave me
Restrained and weak.
It helps me to sort through a world full of chaos and rubble
and surprisingly find peace.
It reveals to me the gift in such a pessimistic presence
Further establishing the precedence of what happiness could truly look like
when you allow your mind to remain free,
Despite the endless possibilities of having your body trapped
your daily regimens attacked
your feelings ransacked and thrown off balance.
And oh baby! You can trust that I know the challenges
of being that caged bird that always assiduously
seeking a way out...
of the traumatizing snares and agonizing muck
all the while harnessing its broken wing
too stubborn to accept even the slightest idea of being stuck
and just as a phoenix rises from ashes
so too shall I forever rise
above stagnation and procrastination
as well as unconscious and socialistic
racially systemic driven statistics
The point I'm making is this...
Liberation like freedom lives in the mind of the beholder
The true question lives within those divinely chosen
will you be subdued by your excuses?
Or use what is conducive to incite what's useful
and essential for change?
For time wasted is forever time taken in vain.
So let us cultivate success from pain
And treat freedom and liberty the same
Free your mind and seek ways to leave a stain
That'll remain in the hearts and lives of others
Time and time again.
Refrain from anything that'll leave you strained
chained or weighed down in disdain and regret
Live your life! Chase the dreams that you set.
In times of darkness don't fret yet practice patience
They may trap your body but your mind shall remain liberated.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Liberated by MR

I have no memories of the beginning
so I await no arrival of the present.
Although I am current, I still feel abandoned and removed from my birth,
my identity and my progress.
So I walk alone without any thought,
subconsciously aware with no pride
or further intent.
Am I alive?
Seems as though I'm programmed to adhere to the expectations of society
that landed me here.
Not knowing exactly where, or specifically how, it happened.
However, these questions remain with no answers,
but symbolize a form of living with no means.
And yet I feel unapologetically justified
Justified to exist.
Justified to breathe.
Justified to be me.
And justified to have no memories of the beginning and still be
able to smile.
But how have I transcended and evolved?
Comprehending just enough to have feeling.
Aha, I have questions and it appears that I too have thoughts.
Will pride stabilize me?
Or will intent keep me from having memories of the beginning?
Just knowing I have me helps me
feel liberated nonetheless.
So liberated I am!

Inspired by Joan and Navaneeth

Liberate or Revolt by MM

Intuitive soul, this kind of gift is heaven sent,
Blessed by the Creator of all that exist.
This gift is heaven sent!
This intuitive soul
used to recognize their evil plots and plans by distant miles.

Our hearts pulsating beats,
sounds off like a tribal drum beat.
The revolution will not be televised!

Liberating the Palestinian,
From the River to the Sea.
Yeah I said it
Liberate Palestine from the River to the Sea.
No, you cannot go on, keep on, suppressing
the humble man's opinion.

Warring the streets until the whole world is free
from oppression, suppression,
from every River to every Sea.

1820, like the Mayflower that liberated free slaves
from the Americas to Liberia.

Born Black by RP

Born Black-American what is that?
Some unseen
unsigned
lifelong pact
with worldly judgments instantly intact
our communities have histories of being under attack
freedom without equality has been written in our U.S. Constitution's
contracts.
Born Black
Dr. King's Dream of Beautiful
Freedom with equality, a strong solution
A Dream of unified inclusions of diversity in every American
institution
A Dream helping to heal
Born Black
American history facts.
Our history's written truths is way out of whack
Somehow our history has been hijacked
or maybe its been Russian cyber hack attacked
I was Born Black and American
Born into American history traditions
It's not easy embracing our African roots' ambitions
We have to fight for every system admission
Never allowing Dr. King's dream to go deferred
Be thankful for Rosa Parks' displays of strong nerve
Malcolm X's strength had to be heard
Underground Railroads because freedom would not be deterred
In two thousand twenty four
Let your Born Black in America stories
Be observed
Never allowing your Dreams to be deterred.



PAYING IT FORWARD: FREER RECORDS

Interview by Kelli

This story begins with a young man named Fury. An artist and musician, Fury grew up in downtown New York City in the 1990's. Inspired by his friend and mentor, a formerly incarcerated man named Pridgen, Fury's passion project was born in 2013. He set out to make a concept album about the Black American experience of mass incarceration. The album would be called "Die Jim Crow." It was written and performed by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated artists, including a woman named BL that Fury wrote a letter to after seeing a TEDx talk that she participated in from a Pennsylvania prison where she was then serving a 10-year sentence. She ended up writing two songs for the album.

After BL came home in 2015, she and Fury continued collecting people's stories and music. Through the relationships they were creating with artists across the country, the team came to understand that there was no single "Black experience" of mass incarceration. They realized that this was not going to be a "one-and-done" situation. Instead of the original idea for a double album LP, they formed Die Jim Crow Records, the first nonprofit record label in America for prison-impacted musicians. Recently, the name was changed to FREER Records (Freer, as in more free).

In September, Kelli had the honor to sit down with BL, who is now Co-Executive Director of FREER Records to learn more about this inspiring, ground-breaking organization.

KELLI: Let's just start with the name change...

BL: (Laughs) Yeah, the name made sense for the album, and I understand that the word "die" is visceral, and it makes you feel something. But when you put that word in the title of an organization, it's negative. And mass incarceration isn't only about Black people. These are everyday people behind the walls. It doesn't matter what color or culture they are. Prison is a melting pot. We all share a similar experience regardless of our race when we're incarcerated. It's been awesome watching the art evolve itself. We don't tell it what to do. We come up with an idea to start and it does what it's going to do. It's a beautiful thing to watch! Everybody wants to feel more free! That's why we changed the name.

KELLI: Why did you feel like there was a need for FREER Records?

BL: The answer is two-fold. First, we wanted to provide an outlet to musicians to be heard beyond prison walls, in their own words and their own voices. As long as people are invisible, people won't really see or hear them, so they aren't going to feel any urgency to change anything. But when you start seeing and hearing people? That's when things start to change.

I'll give you an example. I did that 2014 TEDx talk in Muncy State prison where I was incarcerated. There was a group called the Lady Lifers – women who had been in for 40-45 years – that performed too. Our audience was made up of people from the outside, including judges, lawyers and politicians. The Lady Lifers sang a song called "This is Not My Home." As they sang, you could hear audible gasps in the audience, as people realized, maybe for the first time, what life-without-parole really looked like. These people who have the power to make change finally got a chance to see and hear these people behind the bars. And after that, women started getting their sentences commuted in my state. It's all about seeing each other's humanity.

KELLI: And the other reason?

BL: It's the crazy level of talent on the inside! We don't want people listening to the music just because it's by people who have been in prison. The truth is that the creativity that comes out of people in prison is different than in the real world.

In prison, everything takes ingenuity or creativity. Whether it's eating, or dressing, or whatever else, it always takes that extra step to create it and make it happen. When you don't have all the resources, creativity just becomes part of your fabric. And the people in prison have real stories. You have time in prison to be introspective and tap into places that people on the outside just don't. They're too busy or too distracted. Inside, there's this

heightened sense of awareness. Because people are locked up in this little space. It will seem almost otherworldly, because they're actually living in another world! It comes across as very authentic. You can feel the pain in their voice, and yet typically it's almost always very hopeful. Even though the person might be going through the worst thing, there is a glimmer of hope. And we believe that level of talent, creativity, and along with these incredible stories, should be celebrated and on display.

KELLI: Can you describe exactly how you do the work?

BL: Of course. We travel to state prisons all over the country. We've been in 17 institutions in more than 10 different states. We haven't gone into a federal prison yet, but we hope that will happen. The first time we go into a facility, we host a sort of talent show or audition. One thing about music people in prison, they tend to be very tapped in. So, word is going to spread. Usually, we're a really small and geeky community. Someone puts up a flier, and one way or another, the music people are going to find out about it and they'll be there.

At that first session, we explain what we do. And almost always, a "band leader" emerges. They may not be the most talented individual out of the bunch, but they are a leader, the one that's great with logistics and organizing people. That person always emerges and they become our point person.

When we come back to the facility a second time, people have been forming groups, writing music and rehearsing. It just happens organically. The third time, that's usually when we start recording. We block out an entire week to record as much music as we can. We may have to go into a janitor's closet to do vocals, a gym to do instruments. It just depends upon the facility. We just start making music and we all forget we're in prison for a week!

KELLI: What kind of music do people make most often?

BL: It's everything! We get vocalists, instrumentalists. We get guitars, keyboards, bass, native drums. One band leader played six different instruments! In South Carolina we worked with a 10-man hip hop group. We get people who have software to make beats, people who play violin...

KELLI: Where do they get the instruments?

BL: It really depends on what a prison allows. We launched a campaign called Instruments Into Prisons. Through IIP, we've provided more than \$25,000 in new and used instruments to incarcerated musicians in different facilities.

KELLI: Okay, you've spent a week recording. Then what?

BL: We do a lot of post-production work, bringing in different instrumentalists, and then we get it mastered and distribute it like any standard label. We're on all of the streaming platforms.

KELLI: Do your artists get compensated?

BL: Yes, absolutely. All of our artists own their masters, the original recording, 100%. We don't sign our artists, just the project that we're working with them on for a limited time license. We split the royalties (earnings) 60/40 (artist majority). We're always going to make sure they get rightful compensation.

KELLI: As you know, this issue is on the theme of Liberation. What do you think it is about music as an art form that is so liberating?

BL: It's the sounds. Their frequencies are waves and they enter our spirits. I really believe that. Sounds can destruct or heal depending

upon what frequencies we are sending out. Music has the power to open hearts and minds. And that's our mission. Let me show you how it can work.

So let's say, a business owner loves an album that comes out on our label. Let's say it's his favorite album. And then maybe the next time someone applies for a job with him, he finds out that person has a criminal record. And maybe he's never hired someone with a felony before. But maybe he loves the album so much. Through music, maybe for the first time ever, he's connected with an artist who's been incarcerated. He's been able to see that person as more than their crime. And because of that, maybe he'll consider hiring this person. And maybe hiring that person becomes the best decision of his life! All of this becomes possible if we just open our hearts and our minds. Music is just the quickest way to get there.

KELLI: What advice would you give to members reading this who want to pursue music or art?

BL: The best advice I can give is to be inspired. When people talk, listen. There are stories in everything. If you don't remember things well, write them down. Start a journal. Use all of it as inspiration. It might not be a song, but maybe it's a short story, or a poem, or a novel. Whatever. Just stay inspired. It is the only way to be free.

My own career started on a prison bunk. I was super depressed, and for the first time in my life, I wasn't making music. I wasn't ever trying to be a musician or a rapper. I made music for my own survival. I was having a complete writer's block when I first saw that flier, and everyone was telling me, "You gotta do it!" But then they reminded me, "This is for the DOC, you gotta do something kinda cheesy, like some Nickelodeon-type stuff!"

It was a new challenge. I was writing about my real life. One of the songs I wrote was called "Freedom on a Saturday Night." It was about being tired of riding down that same old road. I wanted to change! There was this one lyric that said: "So I wash you away/I'm getting drenched by the rain/Every drop brings a little change/And these clouds will never be the same." I just really wanted to be this new person. And I think that's why I had that writer's block. I was so used to writing about the old me. And I didn't want to write that anymore. I just opened up. You never know where your art will take you. That's why you gotta just create it and see what happens!

In their first 10 years, FREER Records had more than 700,000 streams label-wide, 2 LP's, 4 EP's, and 14 singles released of wide genre variety and high quality. They recorded 65 incarcerated musicians, 18 formerly incarcerated musicians. They aim to grow and strengthen the organization, making FREER Records a household name and online presence while diversifying the range of creative outputs and services.

Free Minds loves the mission of FREER Records. Thank you, BL, Fury and the entire team of artists on the inside and the outside for using art to make all of us FREER! If you would like, you can contact FREER Records directly at 1501 N. Broad St. Suite #7, Philadelphia, PA 19122.



REAL WORLD OF WORK

Interview by Jennifer

While I had known that Larry was a dedicated worker, it wasn't until our interview that I learned just how much he works and how little he sleeps! So I was particularly grateful to steal some time with him on the phone one afternoon before he put himself to bed in the evening. His alarm goes off at a time I consider the middle of the night so that he can clock in at his National Airport job working with LSG Sky Chefs at 4am. Larry said he doesn't need that much rest and he wants to make sure that he gets his job done ensuring those airline passengers have all the snacks and supplies they need to travel happy.

How did you approach your job search?

After 31 years away, I came home to the Baltimore halfway house, which was a hard way to start, but I hit the ground running thanks to my support system.

I took advantage of every pass to leave the halfway house that I could get. Along those lines, I quickly joined Civic Works in Baltimore, which is an 8-week program that certified me in CPR, electronics, asbestos removal, and flagging. It was a great fit and I was even asked to speak at our graduation. That organization helped me get my resume together for my job search.

So did you look for work in Baltimore?

Yes, because it seemed easier to work closer to the halfway house than commute to DC, but the wages are lower in Maryland. I had been a certified welder while incarcerated, so I already knew how to measure and had other construction skills so I began to look for work that I was qualified for.

And I got my first job in a unique way! One day I was walking down the street and saw a box making company, so I walked right in. I was surprised to see a guy from the halfway house who worked there and he helped get me on. I started

working there from 6 am to 4 pm four days a week and really liked it. However, I eventually was released from the halfway house and moved back to DC. After a while I got too tired of commuting back to Baltimore from the city, so I started looking for work in DC.

Is that when you joined Amazon as a driver?

Yes, after cleaning Metro buses for a few months, I was hired by an Amazon delivery subcontractor who had employed another Free Minds member. The owner of the company is actually a returning citizen as well and likes to give opportunities to people with similar backgrounds. I worked for Amazon from June 2023-May 2024.

My earliest routes were in Arlington and Fairfax, Virginia, which I wasn't as familiar with, but I quickly learned my way around and appreciated that there was always somewhere to park! But then the Amazon contract shifted to DC, so I loved driving all over the city delivering packages and seeing all the changes that had happened since I've been gone. It felt great to get paid to reconnect with my city! It warmed my heart to drive around my home and learn my way around again. I felt safe. I really liked it. However, it was taxing on the body. On a typical day I would deliver 340- 520 packages in less than 11 hours.

Do you remember the day I called you to ask to speak with a member who wanted to join the Amazon team? I had been talking with a member who had recently come home through the Second Look Amendment Act and quickly gotten his driver's license. He was eager to get to work ASAP so I called you out of the blue and asked if you could talk right then with this member and me. I am SO grateful that you pulled your big Amazon delivery truck over to a (hopefully!) safe side of the road to spend a long time meeting this member and

coaching him through his application process. As if that weren't enough, you volunteered to meet him at the Amazon office ON YOUR DAY OFF to guide him through the process and tell the company that you would be his trainer. As you know, he quickly learned the ropes under your guidance and went on to be a successful delivery driver.

Yes, I was happy to talk with him and help him get on board. I can relate to people who had a similar experience and I know the struggle even though I didn't know this member directly. A lot of guys need this connection and I wanted to help him figure out that this could be a good way to get your feet wet.

For the past five months you've been at LSG Sky Chefs catering services as a driver at the airport. How do you like it?

I love driving the catering trucks to and from the airplanes for Delta, Air Canada, American, and United. I'm thrilled that I passed the TSA background check! It's a lovely work

environment. My actual shift is 4 am to 12:30 pm, but I often work overtime until 3:30 pm, earning time and half pay. If there's an opportunity for overtime, I'm going to take advantage of it. So my salary ranges between \$20 and \$30/ hour and I get weekly pay. I appreciate that lunch in the cafeteria and snacks are provided for free. I also get free employee parking. It feels good to know those planes are well stocked and those passengers are going to have an easy flight in part because of my work.

Do you have any job advice for members coming home?

Don't be too hard on yourself and don't give up. Just make sure you have your Social Security card and birth certificate lined up for when you get home so you can quickly get your ID. Then get your driver's license as soon as possible. I failed my permit test FIVE times – and the DMV only lets you take the test six times in a year. But I didn't give up! After I got the permit, I passed the road test on my first try and I've been driving ever since.

CONNECT ON CORRLINKS

By Aneka



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

Free Minds Corrlinks Info:

Corrlinks First Name: Free Minds

Corrlinks Last Name: Connect

Corrlinks Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org

Free Minds Getting Out Info:

Getting Out First Name: Connect

Getting Out Last Name: Free Minds

Getting Out Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org

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

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

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

REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hey Fam!

Welcome to Fall and more comfortable weather! It's good to be back in stride with y'all as always and share my thoughts on liberation. The first thought that popped in my head regarding liberation is that it's unique to the person. I believe that to be fully liberated one must be prepared to think independently and not hold views that others expect or insist one uphold. A liberated person has the ability to practice the virtue of independence. This means not having to subject oneself to political correctness or think with another person's brain. In this sense, being liberated means being made free from the shackles of public opinion. It means being willing to stand on one's own two feet, look at the world through one's own eyes and say exactly what one sees.

Liberation can also be attained by anyone because it resides in the heart and mind, therefore nationality doesn't matter neither does race, age or gender. Take the Free Minds motto for instance. "You may be locked up, but your mind can be free." So many people have survived with this same mantra when in less than ideal life circumstances. I would also add that freedom from physical, mental, and emotional constraints tends to happen when a person is rooted in the present and not in his or her past mistakes and failures, because we have the ability to make tomorrow better instead of ruminating on our past failures and mistakes.

So in all, I would say that liberation is, paradoxically, an outcome of absolute acceptance of what is, and letting go of the need to judge yourself and others. I believe that we alone can prevent our own liberation and we have the power and ability to strive to be liberated in our everyday affairs!

Thanks for allowing me to share my perspective and as usual, I can not leave without dropping some very helpful and beneficial resources on you guys!

University of the District of Columbia
Workforce Development and Lifelong Learning
Lamond-Riggs Campus
(formerly known as Bertie Backus Campus) (Limited Offering)
5171 South Dakota Avenue NE
Washington, DC 20017
202.274.7181



The mission of the UDC Division of Workforce Development and Lifelong Learning (WDLL) is to reduce unemployment and underemployment in the District of Columbia by enhancing the skills of its residents. The program provides training to DC residents aimed at helping them earn jobs, get promoted, and train for careers in new industries. The below courses are offered:

Pathway 1: Construction and Property Management

Pathway 2: Early Childhood Education (CDA)

Pathway 3: Healthcare Direct Care and Administration

Pathway 4: Hospitality and Tourism

Pathway 5: Information Technology and Office Administration

Until we *Connect* again!

– Ms. Keela

Name _____ Date _____

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: COMMUNITY (VOLUME 13, ISSUE 5)

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on **Community**. We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 14, Issue 1 will be exploring the theme of **The Future**.

(1)

Share a story about a time when you felt a strong sense of community or support. How did it make you feel?

(2)

What are some communities that you belong to? How has it shaped who you are?

(3)

Would you consider your community your family or are they two separate groups? Why do they differ or why are they alike?

(4)

Reflect on a common goal or vision that you think would benefit your community?
How could you and others work together to achieve this goal, and what role might you play?

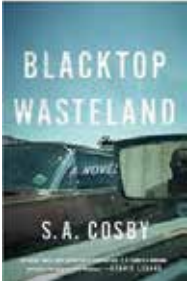
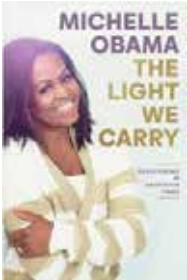
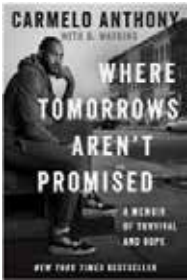
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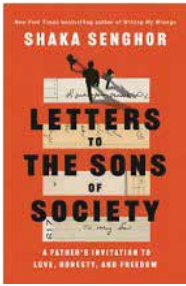
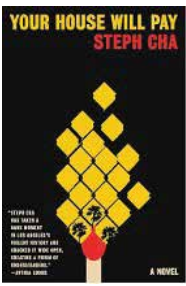
Write about how diversity within a community can be a strength. What are some ways that diversity can benefit the community?

*Your Free Minds Family would like to thank you all for your continuous participation and contributions for the Connect magazine that you all enjoy receiving so much. As much as we would like to include every submission that we receive, space limitations and mail delays prevent us from doing so. However, know that all of your submissions will be shown to our dedicated volunteers and you will receive comments on your poetry, which we will mail back to you. We encourage you to mail in your submissions for the upcoming Connect issues (**Community** and **The Future**) as soon as you receive the current Connect so that you have a better chance at being included in the next issue. – Your Free Minds Family*

BOOK BALLOT

Alright Free Minds readers, get your voting pens ready because it is time to choose the next Books Across the Miles book! Please write to us with your 1st and 2nd choices from the list below. Also, if you have a book in mind you'd like to see on the next ballot, please let us know!

1		<i>Blacktop Wasteland</i> by S.A. Cosby [Mystery] Beauregard “Bug” Montage left his notorious past as the East Coast’s best known wheelman in exchange for becoming a loving father and husband and a hardworking mechanic. When his perfectly cultivated new life begins to crumble, he finds himself turning back to a life of blood and bullets. An exciting opportunity is presented to him, and Bug can’t resist getting back in the driver’s seat. Haunted by the ghost of his infamous past and responsible for his present role as a father, Bug must find a way to navigate his new life.
2		<i>The Light We Carry: Overcoming in Uncertain Times</i> by Michelle Obama [Non-fiction] Through a series of stories and reflections on change, challenge, and power, Michelle Obama offers a fresh perspective on how we can build up others and the wider world around us by discovering deeper truths and new pathways for progress. Sharing her experience as a mother, daughter, wife, friend, and First Lady, she captures what is needed to successfully adapt to change and overcome obstacles. Through her wisdom and humor, she encourages listeners to work through their fears and find strength in community.
3		<i>Where Tomorrows Aren't Promised: A Memoir of Survival and Hope</i> by Carmelo Anthony [Memoir] In his memoir, professional basketball player Carmelo Anthony shares his journey from growing up in the Brooklyn projects to becoming a champion on the world stage. Navigating an education system that ignored and criticized him while also dealing with the untimely deaths of loved ones, Carmelo struggled to survive emotionally and physically. With the guidance of family and mentors in both the streets and on the court, he found the endurance to pursue his dreams. His story is one of strength and determination, and the tale of a kid who defied a world of violence and poverty to make it big.

4		<i>Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in her Head: Poems</i> by Warsan Shire [Poetry] In her first full-length poetry collection, Warsan Shire shares the story of a young girl forced to make her own way into womanhood. Her poetry draws on the experiences of immigrants, mothers, daughters, Black women, and teenage girls through the worlds of perfume, jasmine, blood, and music. This collection is a showcase and celebration of women's resilience and survival.
5		<i>Letters to the Sons of Society: A Father's Invitation to Love, Honesty, and Freedom</i> by Shaka Senghor [Self-help] Shaka Senghor knows what it is like to raise a child behind bars, with his first son being born shortly after he was incarcerated for second-degree murder. When Senghor came home, he fathered his second son. In this collection of letters written to his two sons, Senghor explores his experiences as a Black man in the United States and unpacks the toxic expectations of masculinity, love, and mental health that are placed on boys from an early age. In a passionate call to fathers and sons, he encourages both to develop positive relationships with each other and other men by seeking healing and addressing mental health.
6		<i>Your House Will Pay</i> by Steph Cha [Fiction] 1990s Los Angeles is reeling in the aftermath of the police shooting of a Black teenager. Grace, the daughter of Korean-immigrants, is largely sheltered and working long hours in her family's pharmacy. Meanwhile Shawn has dissociated from politics and protests after an act of violence shattered his family years ago. When another shocking crime hits LA, both Grace and Shawn are forced to come to terms with their own histories amidst a city on the brink of experiencing more violence.



TECH TALK: PREPARING FOR THE WORKFORCE – EMAILS *By Emily*

Outside of the occasional birthday card or corresponding with someone who is incarcerated, letter writing is becoming increasingly rare (aside from at Free Minds of course 😊). Instead, many people choose to communicate via text message or email. We are going to tackle creating and using an email in this month's Tech Column.

The first thing to know is that there are many different email service providers out there – Gmail (which is part of Google), Yahoo, Outlook (which is part of Microsoft), iCloud (which is part of Apple), and many others. Creating an account with any of these platforms is free. There aren't many pros and cons to picking one service over the other, though I will say that anecdotally it seems that most people go with Gmail. I use Gmail and I find it to be relatively easy to navigate.

Once you have picked your provider it is time to create the account. You will need to come up with a unique email address. When you enter it in, the website will tell you whether someone is already using that address. Oftentimes people will add numbers to the end of their username in order to make it unique (i.e. your birthday or the year). Most people use some variation on their full name as their email address (for example, JoeSmith or JoeSmith1985). Given that people commonly communicate with potential employers through email, it's important to have an email address that makes it clear who they are corresponding with and no nicknames or personal language – for example "loverman@gmail.com" would not be an ideal email address! We did have a member who had "iwanttohireyou@gmail.com" to give subliminal messages but we advised him to change that 😊

I'm sure many of you are familiar with Corrlinks, which acts like email but with a few key differences. The first is that unlike Corrlinks, creating and using an email is **free**. It is also an instantaneous method of communication. Messages on Corrlinks may take up to a couple hours to come through while you can send an email to anyone in the world with an email address and they should get it within a few seconds.

Finally, most email services do not have a character limit. This means your message can be as long as you want. You can also change the color and shape of the text as well as the font. You can send pictures and documents over email as well.

After you create your email you may find that your inbox (where new emails show up) is filling up rather quickly. This happens because, much like old-school paper junk mail you used to get in your mailbox, you can also get electronic junk mail in your inbox. This is called spam. I would encourage you to delete any unwanted messages right away so that they do not clutter your inbox or use up all of your storage.

In order to keep your inbox organized you can set up labels. For example, you might have one label that says "Bills" and one that says "Job." Everytime you get an email that fits in one of those categories, you can label it. Then, when you click on the "Bills" label all of the emails will be in one place.

When you go to write an email, the first thing you need to do is click "Compose" or "New Email" or something similar in order to open a new email. There will be a field at the top that says "To." This is where you type in the email of the person you are writing to. There are also options for "Cc" or "Bcc." "Cc" is when you want to send the email to additional people. "Bcc" will also send the email to additional people, but the recipient will not know who it is being sent to. For example, when I send out an email to a large group of people, I use "bcc" so that the recipients' contact information is private. There will also be a line that says "Subject." This is where you should write a concise phrase that summarizes the email (for example, an email with a submission for the next Connect might say "Connect submission" in the subject line). This is what appears in people's inboxes and helps them to know what your email is about.

This is just a brief introduction to email. Please write to us with any additional questions! We would also love to hear your ideas for future tech columns.

DC PHOTOS *By Antoine*

As requested by our readers



Rooftop view of the National Harbor



El Sabor a Mexico, a popular taco spot in Takoma Park



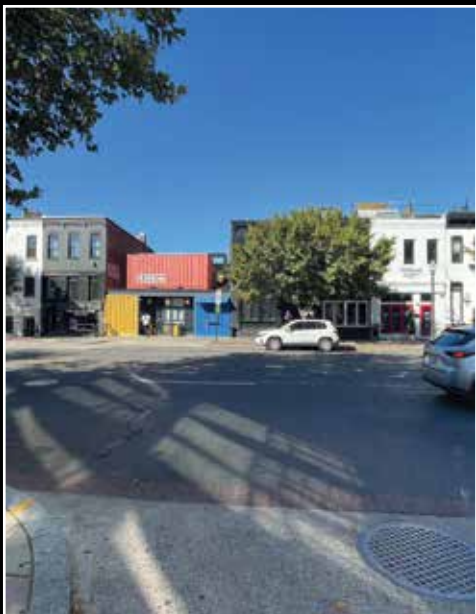
Inside of The Nationals Baseball Stadium in SW DC

DC PHOTOS *By Antoine*

As requested by our readers



DMV themed exhibit inside the MGM Hotel & Casino at the National Harbor in Maryland



9th and U St NW



Pool Slide Located in Barry Farms Recreation Center

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

THE WRITE WAY: HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO YOUR LAWMAKER

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

By Rebecca

Throughout history and in current times, everyday people have, and continue to demonstrate the importance of playing a part in the work of liberation. One great tool for doing this is engaging with your lawmakers and representatives. According to advocacy groups, letters are a highly effective way to communicate with your elected officials. In fact, many legislators see a single letter as representing the viewpoint of multiple constituents who didn't make the effort to write. When writing to an elected official, you can share your thoughts on policies and laws that you would like to see changed and make suggestions about what you would like to see in those areas. In addition to sharing concerns, letters are also a great way to let a legislator know that you appreciate something they have done, like if they created or voted for a bill that you strongly believe in. By sharing your thoughts, you are letting your lawmakers know that you are paying attention and are invested in the well-being of your community. At the end of the day, your elected officials are meant to work for you, so let them know what you think and what you want. To help you do this, here are some tips for writing effective letters to your lawmakers (with the sources for these recommendations listed in parentheses).

1. Keep your letters brief, no longer than one page, and focus on one issue per letter. Since legislative staff members read several letters in a day, it's best practice to keep your letter brief and to the point (Source: ACLU, 2024).
2. Write as clearly as possible to ensure that your thoughts can be easily read, especially with handwritten letters (Source: CJD Foundation, 2024).
3. Use formal titles when addressing envelopes and when addressing your representative in your letter (Source: Common Cause, 2022).
 - Councilmembers are addressed as "Councilmember [Last name]" or by any specific leadership title they have, like "Chairman Mendelson" (Common Cause, 2022)
 - Members of the US House of Representatives should have envelopes addressed to "The Honorable [Full Name]," and be referred to in your letter as "Representative/Congressman/Congresswoman [Last Name]" (Common Cause 2022)
4. In your first paragraph, state that you are a constituent (someone who lives or votes in the area that they represent) and share the specific issue you are writing about. If you've ever voted for this official or supported their campaign, let them know. Also, if you're writing about a particular piece of legislation, it's helpful to include the bill number. (Source: ACLU, 2024)
5. Give your three strongest reasons for your position on the issue, and then explain those reasons. If you have a personal story about how this issue impacts you and/or your family, be sure to include it. (Source: ACLU, 2024)
6. In light of your position, clearly state what you want your elected official to do (Source: Common Cause, 2022).
7. Even if you have very strong, negative feelings about the issue you are addressing, remain respectful in your letter. It's okay to take a strong stance, but practicing civility will have a more positive impact (Source: ACLU, 2024; Common Cause, 2022)
8. Request a reply and include your mailing information. And it's okay to write a follow-up letter if you don't hear back (Source: Common Cause, 2022).
9. If your legislator carries out the action you want, (introduces or votes for a bill you support, takes a stance that you agree with, etc), send them a thank you note (Source: Common Cause, 2022)

On the next page are the names and mailing information for legislators in Washington DC you may wish to contact: For those living elsewhere, write to your elected officials. It will make a difference!

DC Legislators

Mayor Muriel Bowser
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004

DC Councilmembers are also located in the John A. Wilson Building. Below are the councilmembers from each ward and their suite numbers to include next to the street address. (Example: Councilmember [Name] 1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite 100 Washington, DC 20004)

- Ward 1 Councilmember:
Brianna K. Nadeau, Suite 108
- Ward 2 Councilmember:
Brooke Pinto, Suite 106
**Term ends 1/2/25; running unopposed for reelection*
- Ward 3 Councilmember:
Matthew Frumin, Suite 408
- Ward 4 Councilmember:
Janeese Lewis George, Suite 105
**Term ends 1/2/25; running for reelection*

- Ward 5 Councilmember:
Zachary Parker, Suite 102
- Ward 6 Councilmember:
Charles Allen, Suite 110
- Ward 7 Councilmember:
Vincent C. Gray, Suite 406
**Term ends 1/2/25; not seeking reelection*
- Ward 8 Councilmember:
Trayon White, Sr., Suite 400
**Term ends 1/2/25; running for reelection*

At-Large Councilmembers (representing all DC residents):

- Chairman Phil Mendelson, Suite 504
- Chair Pro Tempore
Kenyan R. McDuffie, Suite 506
- Anita Bonds, Suite 404
- Robert C. White, Suite 107
**Term ends 1/2/25; running for reelection*
- Christina Henderson, Suite 402
**Term ends 1/2/25; running for reelection*

Congress (the law-making body for the US federal government)

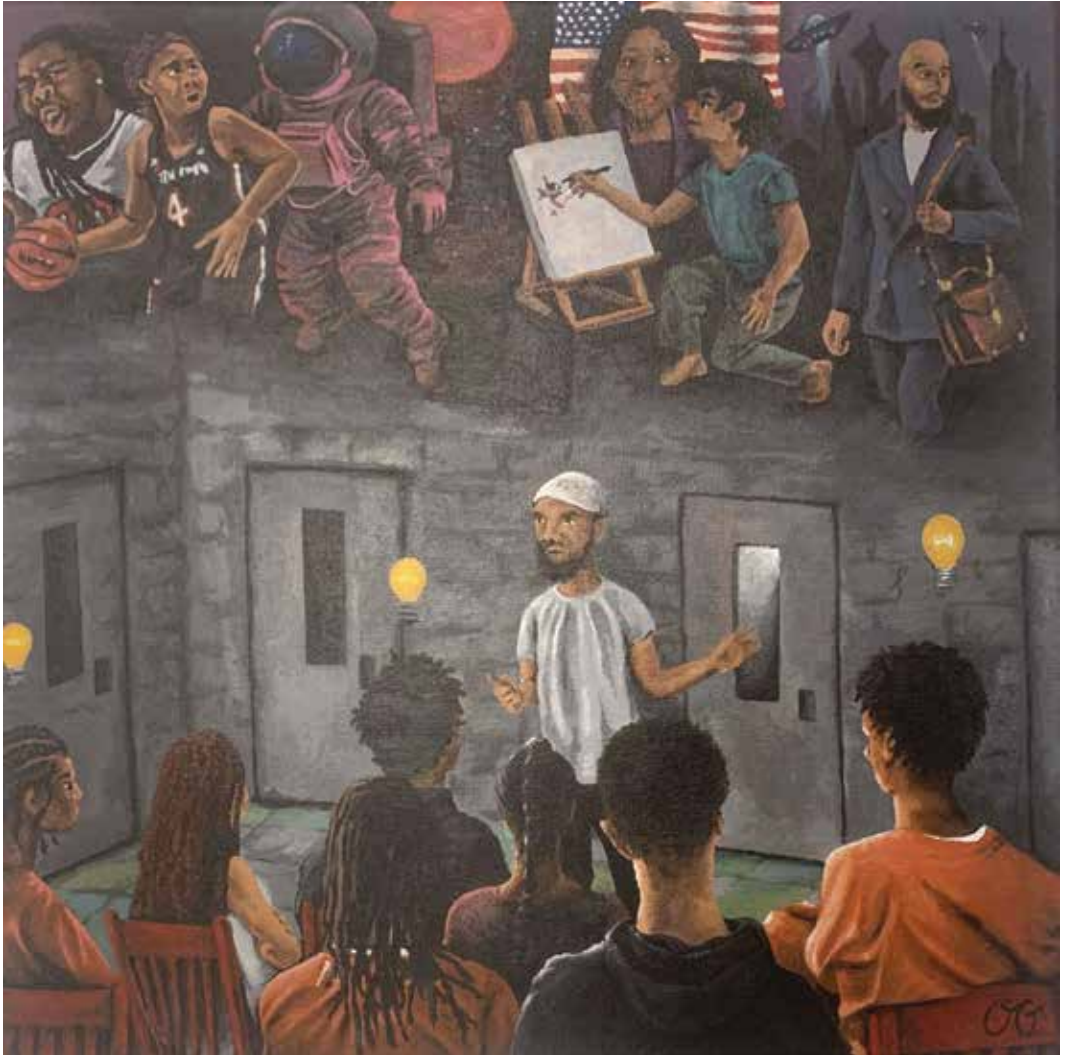
Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton
2136 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515
**Term ends 1/3/25; running for reelection*

Executive Branch

President Joe Biden Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Vice President Kamala Harris
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

*Painting by FM member OG titled
"Time Capsules"*



DEEP DIVE: A HISTORY OF FEMALE HEADS OF STATE

On June 6, 2024, voters in Mexico elected Claudia Sheinbaum to be the 66th president in its history. The 65 before her were all men. Sheinbaum's path to the top job in the nation of 127.5 million reflects a changing world for women seeking positions of government leadership.



Claudia Sheinbaum

There have been female rulers and monarchs of lands and nations for thousands of years, but the history of electorates choosing female heads of state is far, far shorter. The history of women in leadership roles is a relatively recent development, particularly when it comes to the highest levels of government. While women have been involved in politics for centuries, it wasn't until the 20th century that significant progress was made in terms of female representation in heads of state positions.

Technically, the first woman elected to lead a nation was Khertek Anchimaa-Toka, who in 1940 became the leader of Tuvan People's Republic, a now-defunct satellite state in the Soviet Union. Anchimaa-Toka was the wife of the nation's supreme leader, though, which suggests it might not have been a completely free and fair election.



Khertek Anchimaa-Toka

Some countries have prime ministers instead of or in addition to presidents. Prime ministers are not typically elected directly by voters; rather, the choices of voters in other elections decides who will be the majority party, and the prime minister is the leader of that party. Or, in some cases, a head of state nominates a prime minister.

The first female prime minister chosen by a party elected to power was India's Indira Gandhi, who led one of the world's most populous countries for a total of 15 years between 1966 and 1984. At first, the perception and expectation of Gandhi was that as a woman, she would be weak and serve as a puppet for the government; she confounded those expectations and became a person of great influence on the world stage. On October 31 of 1984, Gandhi was assassinated by two of her own bodyguards.



Indira Gandhi

In 1979, British voters elected the Conservative Party to power, a body led by Margaret Thatcher, who would serve as the nation's prime minister for 11 consequential years during the Cold War, a close ally of U.S. President Ronald Reagan. Both Gandhi and Thatcher drew a common nickname during their tenures: the "Iron Lady."



Margaret Thatcher

In 1974, 30 years after Anchimaa-Toka's term

ended, Isabel Perón succeeded her husband Juan as president of Argentina after he died in office. So while she represented a duly elected government, she herself was not elected by the voters. Two years later, the military carried out a coup and took control of the country.



Isabel Perón

It was not until 1980 that Vigdís Finnbogadóttir (pronounced Vay-Dis Fin-pow-ta-tare) became the first female head of state to be directly elected when the voters of Iceland chose her. Since that time, about five dozen different women have been elected to be president or chancellors of countries, and about 75 have become prime ministers through nomination or party elections.



Vigdís Finnbogadóttir

One standout among these many accomplished women is Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who after a promising career in Liberian politics and finance had to flee her homeland after a coup. Decades later, she would return to lead her nation, and won a Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to center women in the peace process.



Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

All but 41 of these women were chosen for high office since the year 2000, reflecting the growing acceptance of women — who make up half of the world's population— by a diverse array of electorates. Next month, the United States could become the next nation to elect its first female head of state, Democratic nominee Kamala Harris.

WORLD

As the war in Ukraine continues, with tens of thousands of casualties recorded every month, it seems more likely every day that we will soon see a regional war in the Middle East. At the center of this tension: Israel, Lebanon, and Iran.

We have written several times in Free Minds News about Israel's occupation of Palestine and siege on Gaza. While Israel continues its military presence and attacks in Palestine, where millions have been displaced and thousands have been killed, the nation recently turned its attention to Hezbollah, a Lebanon-based political party and militant organization that has fired rockets into Northern Israel during this year of war.

In the past month, Israeli operations (including one involving covertly detonating explosives inside the pagers of thousands of Hezbollah operatives) have taken scores of the organization's leaders off the board, including Hezbollah's longtime leader, Hassan Nasrallah, who was killed in an Israeli strike. However, these pager detonations, bombings, and other assaults have also killed hundreds of people, including children, wounded thousands, and displaced more than a million people.

IN THE NEWS

By John, FM Friend

In response to Nasrallah's killing, Iran (which helps to finance both Hezbollah and Hamas, a political and military organization in Gaza) sent thousands of ballistic missiles into Israeli airspace. Because of the Iron Dome technology Israel employs, which is effective at intercepting and destroying incoming weapons before they make contact, very few missiles landed in Israel and there were no fatalities.

As we write this, Israel has vowed a "painful" response to Iran's attack. And the world holds its breath, as direct military conflict between the two well-armed nations could easily trigger a widening war that draws in the involvement of other powerful countries, including the United States, who recently committed 8.7 billion dollars in military aid to Israel.

NATION

As we write this, there are just over 30 days left until the presidential election. The past month has seen debates between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, and vice presidential candidates J.D. Vance and Tim Walz.

There have been a slew of polls, nationally and in the states that are likely to decide the election: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. The bottom line is that all the available numbers show a race that is impossibly close and could go in either direction.

The polls have highlighted several issues that are most on the minds of the voters. Chief among them, as always, is the economy. Also front and center: immigration and access to abortion in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision striking down Roe v. Wade in 2022.

As the nation prepares for a fraught election day in November, several Southern states are dealing with the horrific fallout from Hurricane Helene, a storm that unexpectedly gained steam as it charged past Mexico and slammed first into the western coast of Florida. As we write this, the death toll from the hurricane has reached 190, and large sections of North Carolina are essentially unlivable, with homes destroyed and roads and bridges washed out.



In Horseshoe Beach, Florida, an aerial view shows debris from damaged houses. Photo credit: Getty Images

SPORTS

Could Jayden Daniels be "The Savior?"

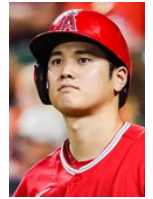
That is the question on the minds of every Washington Commanders fan as we head into the second quarter of the NFL season. With four games down, the Commanders are 3-1 and have sole control of the NFC East as they prepare for an upcoming slate of games that includes the potent team right down interstate 295, the Baltimore Ravens.



Jayden Daniels

There is no question what the secret ingredient is for a team that has been mired in mediocrity for more than a decade at this point, and that is the play of #5, its rookie phenom, Jayden Daniels. Drafted second overall in last year's draft, Daniels has completed more than 80% of his passes through four games and boasts a quarterback rating of 73.3, fourth best in the league. The squad's schedule includes a lot of very winnable games, and joy has returned to fans of the Burgundy and Gold.

As we write to you, the Major League Baseball and WNBA playoffs have only just gotten underway. In baseball, the team to beat in the American League is the New York Yankees, whose lineup features three power hitters with more than 25 homers on the season and two starting pitchers with more than 15 wins. In the National League, the Los Angeles Dodgers come into October with the top record on the strength of its stud hitter, Shohei Ohtani. In the final week of the season, Ohtani became the first player in the history of baseball to hit 50 home runs and steal 50 bases in the same season.



Shohei Ohtani

In the WNBA, the New York Liberty have become a prohibitive favorite to win and are currently two games up on the Las Vegas Aces, winners of the past two championships. The Liberty are paced by a three-headed monster in the form of forwards Breanna Stewart and Jonquel Jones, and guard Sabrina Ionescu.

If the Liberty prevail, they will take on the winner of the series between the Connecticut Sun and Minnesota Lynx in the WNBA Finals.

Meanwhile in the nation's capital, women's soccer team the Washington Spirit has secured a spot in the NWSL playoffs and currently sits in second place in overall league standings, with just a few weeks remaining in the regular season. Led by top goal scorers Trinity Rodman and Ouleymata Sarr, the Spirit will hope to make a deep run in the playoffs. However, a recent slate of injuries, including a season ending injury to Rookie of the Year contender Croix Bethune, has made the Spirit's path forward a little more challenging.



Trinity Rodman



Ouleymata Sarr

DC CULTURE: A SUNDAY AT THE DC JAZZ FESTIVAL

By Sofia

Hey Free Minds family! It's Sofia checking in here with another installment of our DC Culture column where we cover all the latest things happening in the District, whether that be food, art, festivals, literature, music, and more. For this issue, I'll be taking you through some highlights of the second day of the DC Jazz Festival. Unfortunately, I had plans to attend the festival, but caught COVID and was unable to go. Luckily my good friend, Leah, attended the festival which took place August 31st - September 1st at the Wharf from 12pm - 10pm each day. I'll be sharing some of her highlights of the day.

This year was the 20th Anniversary of the annual festival which celebrates jazz artists from around the world in the context of a city with such a rich jazz history. The festival began in 2004 and was originally billed as the Duke Ellington Jazz Festival, to honor the famous jazz musician who hailed from DC. The first installment was located at the historic Lincoln Theater in the heart of the U Street corridor, which was once known as "Black Broadway". U Street's "Black Broadway" history originates from the number of theaters and music venues that once dominated the area and housed famous Black performers including Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Nat King Cole. This history alone serves as the perfect context to celebrate jazz artists local and beyond in our nation's capital.

This year's festival brought an array of artists to the Wharf spanning different subgenres of jazz and ranging from up-and-coming to world-renowned. Leah noted that the crowd was also diverse, with audience members of all different ages, races, and backgrounds. The performances for the festival spanned different stages across the Wharf: Union Stage (a concert venue at the Wharf), the District Pier Stage, Transit Pier Stage, and the Arena Stage, where intimate "Meet the Artists" conversations also took place with artists who played throughout the day. Small stands sold beverages on the pier to refresh festival goers and there are over 50 restaurants and bars already located at the Wharf with different food options.

Leah got to the festival around mid-day and got to catch the lively and upbeat performance of the Bobby Sanabria Multiverse Big Band. Bobby Sanabria is a Grammy-nominated Puerto Rican powerhouse drummer whose band largely plays Afro-Cuban and other Afro-Caribbean jazz varieties. His large ensemble were donned in all-white attire as Sanabria commanded the group through exciting Latin beats. The video that Leah shared with me of the performance showed everyone on their feet and dancing during the band's set.



On the smaller Transit Pier Stage, Leah sat and watched a performance from the New Jazz Underground, an American up-and-coming jazz trio featuring three young musicians, a drummer, saxophonist, and bassist, who all met while studying at Julliard. The creative trio intertwines traditional aspects of jazz with modern influences of hip-hop, house, Afro beats, and Afro-Cuban music. Their innovative set at the festival highlighted the inspiring freshness they bring to jazz. After their performance, Leah headed back to the District Pier Stage to hear a beautiful set from the Grammy award-winning jazz singer Diane Reeves. Her powerful vocals and emotional performance swept through the whole Wharf.

Last, but certainly not least, Leah joined the rest of the festival goers for a dynamic performance from none other than the Chuck Brown Band because what would a DC music festival be without some Go-go? For readers who aren't familiar, Go-go music is a sub-genre of funk, known for distinct percussion rhythmic patterns and live audience call and response. The sub-genre originated from Black musicians in DC and the late Chuck Brown is credited with being "The Godfather of Go-go." His band still performs and their powerful set did not disappoint as the closer of the festival. Go-go is known for covering popular songs and remixing them with Go-go instrumentals, and the band performed popular songs like "Water" by Tyla. They had everyone dancing and on their feet as the distinctly DC drum beats roared through the crowd. Bringing the festival back to its DC roots was a powerful reminder of the impact Black Washingtonians have had on jazz and music in general.

What are some DC music happenings or other DC culture news you would like to see in future issues? Write to us and let us know!

MEDITATION: FINDING FREEDOM WHEREVER YOU ARE *By Kelli*

A lesson that I have had to relearn over and over in my life is how foolish it is to waste time and energy worrying about things over which we have no control. Why is this so hard for me to get through my hard head, you ask? I don't know. But it is. I'm many-years old* (see how crafty I was there?) and I still have to be schooled (and re-schooled!) on this one.

The good news is that one thing we absolutely and always have control over is our own thoughts. That's why we love meditation so much at Free Minds. It may seem odd to meditate about freedom when you're currently incarcerated, but remember, it's your body that is incarcerated. Your mind can always be free! So let's do it. Let's find freedom. Right here, and right now.

You know the drill. If you have a meditation partner, take turns reading the script aloud. If not, just read it through a few times before closing your eyes and meditating on what you've read.

Find a comfortable position wherever you are sitting or lying down. Close your eyes gently, and take a deep breath in through your nose, filling your lungs completely. Hold the breath for a moment, and then exhale slowly through your mouth, releasing any tension or stress.

Allow your breathing to find its natural rhythm. With each inhale, draw in calmness and peace. With each exhale, release any feelings of confinement or restriction.

Picture yourself in a serene space that is entirely your own – one that feels safe and welcoming. Imagine yourself in a quiet, cozy room. The room is filled with soft, warm light. In this space, there are beautiful wooden shelves filled with books, each one representing different experiences and possibilities. You feel peaceful. This is a sanctuary where you

can explore the concept of inner liberation.

Visualize yourself gently reaching for a book from the shelf. As you open it, you find that this book's pages are blank. This book symbolizes the potential and freedom within you. With each breath, imagine that you are writing your own story – one where you are free to be your authentic self, unburdened by any external limitations.

Feel the weight of a pen in your hand as you write. See the words and images you create on the pages of this book coming to life. They represent your aspirations, your dreams, and your inner strength. Breathe in... and exhale. With every breath, these images of yourself and your life grow clearer, and you feel a sense of empowerment and liberation. Your story unfolds with infinite possibilities, reflecting the boundless nature of your spirit.

Focus on the light that fills the room... Feel it bathing and embracing you. This light represents the clarity and freedom that reside within you, in your mind, that no matter where you are or what challenges you face, you have the power to write your own narrative, and to be FREE...

Take a few more deep breaths...

When you are ready, gently bring your awareness back to the present moment. Wiggle your fingers and toes, and when you feel ready, open your eyes.

You are STILL free. You can ALWAYS be free. Carry this sense of inner freedom with you, throughout your day, knowing that your true self is always free to create and embrace new possibilities. You are capable of finding peace and liberation in every moment, no matter where you are.





Photo by Ted Eytan
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THE DC FIGHT FOR STATEHOOD

By Sofia

As we reflect on the theme of liberation for this issue of the *Connect*, it's important that we recognize the local fight for liberation here in Washington, DC. DC is not a state, so the residents here and the local government do not have the same rights that other states do and the federal government holds more power over our affairs. Many DC residents and beyond see this as an unfair form of control and want the district to be liberated from the discretion of the federal government. While there are different movements and ideas for how this will be achieved, this article will focus on a popular argument, which is for DC to become its own state. DC is the only national capital in the world with a representative, democratic constitution whose residents do not have full representation and voting rights.

There are nearly 700,000 residents of DC, more than in the states of Vermont and Wyoming, but DC residents do not have full voting representation in Congress. This lack of voting power and area of limbo that DC residents operate in stems from the District Clause, found in Article I of the Constitution, which empowered Congress to establish a federal capital district "not exceeding ten miles square" where it would "exercise exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever." In other words, this clause established a federal district under the exclusive legislative jurisdiction of the United States Congress. However, this clause failed to provide a means for representation for the district's future residents because the district is not a state, so the rights that apply to states in the Constitution, like seats in Congress, do not apply to DC.

Fights for full voting rights for DC residents and statehood ramped up in the 1950s and 60s during the Civil Rights Movement. The activism during the time, led by Black Washingtonians, led to the successful passage of the 23rd Amendment in 1961, which allows DC residents to be able to vote in the presidential election. The progress for DC residents did not stop there, and local activists continued to push for more rights. In 1970, the District of Columbia Delegate Act was passed, allowing DC to elect a non-voting delegate to the House (Source: Brennan Center for Justice). Progress continued in 1973 with the Home Rule Act of 1973, which was a huge step for DC self-determination. This act established the DC government structure that we know today and devolved a lot of powers that Congress had over DC to a local government elected by DC residents. The Home Rule Act allows for DC residents to elect a mayor and a Council of the District of Columbia.

The Council that was established by this legislation has a lot of the same powers as state legislative branches, including the ability to draft and establish local legislation and approve the District's annual budget submitted by the Mayor. However, Congress (composed of Representatives and Senators elected by residents of the 50 states) still maintains a considerable amount of control over DC. Under Home Rule, Congress reviews all legislation passed by the Council before it

can become law and retains authority over the District's budget. The President appoints DC judges, and DC still doesn't have full voting representation in the House of Representatives or Senate. In 1978, Congress passed the Voting Rights Amendment, which would have given DC voting representation in Congress. However, the Amendment died in 1985, after failing to be ratified by 38 states, so DC still doesn't have this right.

The fight for DC statehood, to give DC residents the same rights and representation as residents in states like Maryland or Virginia, has persisted through the years. Laws are regularly introduced in the House and Senate to make DC the 51st state; however, these laws have failed throughout the years. The need for DC to become a state has been exemplified by Congress continuously stepping in to veto legislation that has been passed by the DC Council, whose members have been democratically elected by DC residents. For example, just in 2023, Congress vetoed the Revised Criminal Code Act, which had been unanimously passed by the Council and would have overhauled DC's century-old criminal code by eliminating most mandatory minimums, updating the definitions of criminal offenses, and creating new grades of sentences based on the severity of the crime.

The fight for DC statehood is intertwined with fights for racial justice as DC has historically been a majority Black city. Therefore not giving DC voters equal autonomy fits within the long history of disenfranchising Black voters. For example, in 1978, Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) attributed the resistance to granting DC full voting representation to "the fear that Senators elected from the District of Columbia may be too liberal, too urban, too Black or too Democratic" (Brennan Center for Justice). Very progressive legislation in DC is often the legislation that is most often interfered with by Congress, sometimes to make a national example at the expense of local voters.

DC residents continue to fight for statehood and liberation. In fact, Free Minds members have been a part of this fight as was highlighted in the "Hometown Pride" issue of the *Connect*, where former intern, Charlotte, sat down with Deangelo to discuss his involvement with the Hands Off DC movement and a rally held in 2023 to protest Congress's involvement in the Revised Criminal Code Act. Hands Off DC is just one example of a local movement for DC statehood; this coalition continues to urge people to take action on keeping Congress out of local DC affairs. According to their website, the coalition includes more than 50 organizations "working at the intersection of police abolition, representative democracy, and the multiracial fight for justice to say in unity: hands off DC." The fight for DC liberation persists, with statehood being one idea to make it happen.

If you're from DC, what would liberation for DC residents look like to you? Write in and let us know.

MEMBERS CONNECT: LIBERATION

Liberated from the Tyranny of Past Childhood Trauma By MAR

The burial service for the recent death of my father was held on July 13th, 2024. The unfortunate reality is that we were estranged for many years. He never provided financial or emotional support for me or my sister Imani. He and my mother separated when I was only two years old.

My father never attended birthdays, AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) basketball games, or school graduations. My sister and I did spend one summer living with him for a month. We even spent a handful of weekends with him as well. After my arrest, he never attended a court hearing, visited, nor wrote me a letter in over 22 years of my incarceration. I remember writing to him just once about 15 years ago. I let him know that I had no hard feelings toward him. I wanted to release him from any guilt he may have felt. My mother read the letter to him over the phone. She said that he shed tears, getting very emotional, and that he thanked me. However, he never wrote me back.

When he died, my sister asked me how I felt towards him. I stated that I didn't have any emotions towards him, not even resentment. My nonchalant attitude for many years was that it was his loss, not mine. How naive was I to think this.

Now to my "conscious mind" that may have been an accurate appraisal. Though it seems that my "body" felt otherwise regarding the matter. There was an unbelievable tightness in my jaw to the point that I even began gritting my teeth. And I had a stiffness in my neck, like I had never felt before. Miraculously, it seems that it was due to my "body's intelligence"-- you know, how our white blood cells don't have to be told to heal an open cut on our hand? My body understood that I wasn't finished with the process of forgiveness. My body was informing me of a path forward out of this unbeknownst grief I was experiencing for my father's absence in my life.

This is where I give my daily yoga practice & meditation much credit. For those who know that mind-body connection that communicates if only we tune out distractions long enough to listen. Only after this "deep exploration of my emotions" on the topic was I permitted the release and the peace of mind that I sought.

You see, there were things that I needed to get off my chest. Things I never had a chance to say to my dad directed towards my dad in his lifetime. Instinctively, something drew me to the mirror in my cell (in needing to see his face). I screamed, yelled, and pointed the finger. I guess it was due to those striking similarities in our facial features, shared DNA, and the mutual blood coursing through our veins. In the mirror's reflection, in my eyes, I saw his eyes. And through my own tears, I saw his as well.

"Where were you when my sister and I needed you?" I asked.

This conversation consisted of years of pent-up anger, frustration, and blame. Though in this moment of ritual-like cleansing of the volatility, toxic tension, and stress that had been weighing me down, it seems, gave way to more divine like attributes as grace, mercy, and forgiveness on my part.

In my father's defense, he had struggled with substance abuse addiction at various stages of his life. And for the past couple of years he had advanced stage dementia, gone completely blind, and deaf in both ears. A month before he died, he had stopped eating and his kidneys collapsed. Hadn't he suffered enough for the failures and shortcomings as a father in this lifetime???

And only then was I held captive NO MORE! Who would've known that at the hands of TRAUMA, I had figuratively, all these years, resided amongst the murky water & debris at the bottom of the Anacostia River... which had left parts of me in my childhood numb, calloused, and insensitive to the harm that I caused others. And only through "forgiveness" -- that I extended to my estranged dad for his absence -- was I released to wash ashore on the riverbank. Gasping while gathering my bearings wondering how much time had elapsed, TRAPPED unbeknownst in the emotional state of past trauma.

Strangely, knowing that I wasn't alone got me thinking about youth offenders in a broader sense. And the direct correlation between their crime and those traumatic experiences that had gone unaddressed. And with this newfound insight of mine, I couldn't see myself moving forward ever again when hearing about crimes committed by D.C. youth (retail theft, shootings, car jackings, etc.) and not wonder what the underlying issues are surrounding their home life.

Questions like: I wonder has that child eaten today? Has he or she witnessed domestic abuse in the home? Is one or more parents absent or incarcerated? Has he or she personally suffered gun violence to friends, loved ones, or themselves? Have they personally been victim to sexual abuse or bullying though have no one to talk to? And, also, how we as a nation continue to fail and let our most vulnerable slip through the cracks? The opportunity to express some of our most intimate thoughts in the Free Minds Connect magazine is a major step in the right direction. Because for some of us, it's the first time that we've felt loved, supported, and really heard.

Now really ponder this! A favorite passage of mine from a book titled "A Course In Miracles" goes:

"The place to begin all correction is within our own consciousness. While it is important to examine the ways your acts have caused pain to others, it is even more important to examine the pain that has caused you to commit those acts. When you are free of pain, you are incapable of inflicting pain. Thus, we heal suffering at its roots not its symptoms."

Now back to the burial service.

With pictures on the way, I hear that it was a beautiful service. My sister Imani had on the most elegant Muslim garb. By the grace of Allah, I was able to time the moment she was at the casket and got a chance to say a few heartfelt parting words to my dad. I was even told that D.C. Mayor Bowser and 8th Ward Councilman Trayon White Sr. both sent letters of condolence to the family that was read aloud. Seems that pops had accomplished some worthy standout achievements in his lifetime. He was a former Golden Glove champion. Was on the D.C. Boxing Commission. And served as a former ANC Commissioner for Ward 6.

I guess that we share more in common than I thought! Because being so vulnerable in my time of grief, I take great pleasure in knowing that I'm serving my community. Presenting something in hopes that someone can take from and apply in their own life. Therefore, devastation isn't so daunting when we fall. Knowing for certain that we have those in our corner to pick us back up and coach us through. We're all in the fights of our lives for our sanity and wellbeing during this time of incarceration and WE WILL come out on the other side VICTORIOUS... Between these lines are where CHAMPIONS ARE BORN!!!! P.S. I love you all.



DID YOU KNOW?

The Haitian Revolution

By Grace

Did you know that the Haitian Revolution was the first successful revolt of the enslaved in history? It began in 1791 and ended in 1804, this revolutionary movement not only reshaped the fate of Haiti but also had impacted global history. It stands as a monumental achievement in the struggle for freedom and equality.

Enslaved Africans in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, known today as Haiti, overthrew their colonial rulers and established the first independent black republic. The island was one of the wealthiest colonies in the Caribbean, due to its lucrative sugar and coffee plantations, which were sustained by the forced labor of the enslaved Africans. They worked under brutal conditions which sparked a series of uprisings that ignited the revolution.

Slavery in Haiti began in 1492 when the colonizer and explorer, Christopher Columbus, first arrived in the Americas. These enslaved Africans were brought from various African countries like Senegal and The Congo. In August 1791, a revolt broke out in the northern part of the colony. The insurrection, led by Boukman Dutty (pictured to the right), a Jamaican-born enslaved man and voodoo priest, quickly gained momentum. Dutty was a religious man and the revolution was greatly shaped by religious freedom, as colonizers used Christianity as a tool of oppression. The prayer given by Boukman Dutty at the meeting that started the revolution is as follows:



"The god who created the earth; who created the sun that gives us light. The god who holds up the ocean; who makes the thunder roar. Our God who has ears to hear. You who are hidden in the clouds; who watch us from where you are. You see all that the white has made us suffer. The white man's god asks him to commit crimes. But the god within us wants to do good. Our god, who is so good, so just, He orders us to avenge our wrongs. It's He who will direct our arms and bring us the victory. It's He who will assist us. We all should throw away the image of the white man's god who is so pitiless. Listen to the voice for liberty that speaks in all our hearts." - Traditional Bois Caiman Prayer August 14, 1791

As the revolution unfolded, the enslaved began to stand up to the colonial workers, and they stopped working the plantations. As the revolution grew it was led by figures like Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines; these revolutionaries not only secured freedom for themselves but also abolished slavery in Haiti and set a precedent for future independence movements around the world against colonial oppression.

The revolution was an intense, armed battle. They fought against French Armed Forces, as well as Spanish and British troops throughout the many years. One of the most notable battles occurred at Crête-à-Pierrot from March 4th until March 24th of 1802, in which Jean-Jacques Dessalines and 1,300 Haitians endured a 20-day siege by 18,000 French soldiers under General Leclerc.

A siege is a military tactic in which an armed force surrounds a place, such as a city or fortress, in an attempt to isolate it and force its surrender through the use of prolonged blockades and attacks. The aim is to cut off essential supplies and reinforcements to the defenders, weakening their position until they give up. The French casualties inflicted made Dessalines victorious.

The Battle of Vertières was the final battle and it took place on November 18, 1803. The victory at Vertières effectively ended French colonial rule in Saint-Domingue. November 18th is celebrated as the Day of Victory in Haiti.

On January 1, 1804, The French recognized Haiti's independence from their colonial rule, making it the second independent nation in the Americas and a powerful symbol of resistance against oppression. However, France also required Haiti to pay a sum of 150 million francs (French currency at the time), setting in motion a cycle of debt that has contributed to poverty and economic instability in Haiti to this day.

Jamaica has their own story of resilience, hope, and the fight for freedom. For centuries, Jamaica was under British rule. The Jamaican people endured slavery but always had a strong spirit of resistance, with early heroes like Samuel Sharpe, who led a famous revolt against slavery in 1831.

Samuel Sharpe was a Jamaican Baptist deacon. This revolt was one of the largest slave uprisings in the British West Indies, where enslaved people, inspired by Sharpe's call for freedom, protested harsh working conditions and the cruelty of slavery.

Sharpe believed in peaceful resistance, but when violence erupted, it resulted in a brutal crackdown by British forces. Despite this, the rebellion played a key role in accelerating the abolition of slavery in Jamaica and the British Empire. Sharpe was captured and executed in 1832, but his legacy of courage and fight for liberation remains a symbol of resistance. Though the uprising didn't succeed immediately, it helped push for the end of slavery a few years later.

As time went on, the people of Jamaica continued to demand more control over their lives. Leaders like Marcus Garvey inspired the country with messages of black pride, unity, and Pan-Africanism. Pan-Africanism is a movement that promotes the unity, solidarity, and empowerment of people of African descent worldwide, with the goal of achieving political, social, and economic liberation. It's to say that no matter where Black people are in the world, they are all one. Figures like Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley worked hard for political changes. By the 1940s, Jamaica had gained more local control, and the dream of full independence became even stronger.

On August 6, 1962, that dream came true, and Jamaica officially became an independent nation. It was a peaceful transition, but it was more than just a change in government—it was a moment of true liberation. Jamaica could now celebrate its culture, shape its future, and create a country where the people could thrive.

The fight for independence was about more than politics. It was about reclaiming identity, standing proud in the face of oppression, and ensuring that everyone, especially the people who were enslaved, had a voice. Jamaica and Haiti's fight for independence from colonial rule is a reminder of how powerful the human spirit is, especially when people come together to fight for what's right.

CONVERSATION WITH REBECCA

Hey Free Minds Family! Rebecca here! I'm pretty new to the crew, having just joined the Free Minds staff at the end of April, so I'll take a moment to introduce myself. My role with Free Minds is the Jail Book Club Coordinator and Co-Facilitator, so I get to help prepare and co-facilitate the in-person book clubs that we have at the DC Jail Complex. I'm really enjoying engaging with our members in both silly games and meaningful discussions about the books we read. I'm an unabashed fan of squirrels, yes, squirrels. They're so cute and I will almost always squeal and smile when I see one! I also love basketball, baking, and books (did you catch that alliteration?), and have been known to tell terribly corny jokes.

Now, on to the topic at hand: Liberation. I find liberation an interesting thing to consider because just as there are so many ways we can be captive, there are also so many forms of liberation. One of the first times I had a strong experience of liberation was the summer before I started 6th grade. There was a community theater about five minutes from my house, and that summer, I was cast in my first real play! Now, I wouldn't say that I was a shy kid, at least not at home. With my family, I had no problem being my totally loud and goofy self, but outside of the house, I was more reserved. But that all changed when I got involved in theater. Theater was a place where I could not only be silly in public; it was a place where being extra was the goal! In doing that first play (I was a munchkin in *The Wizard of Oz!*), I was liberated from the notion that home was the only safe place to fully express myself. My confidence grew, I became a part of a super fun community, and I overcame stage fright, which I didn't even know I had until opening night of the play! All these years, plays, and drama classes later, I still hold so much gratitude for all the ways theater has made me more free to be myself, to take risks, and to discover all that I'm capable of.

A form of liberation I've been learning is the liberation of asking for help. Let me tell you, a few years ago, I would not have seen asking for help as any kind of freedom. I liked NOT

asking for help. It made me feel competent and strong. I was wrapped up in the belief that if I could do it myself, then I should do it myself. But, looking back, I can see that trying to do everything myself was isolating and lonely. It became a burden, and eventually my mentality shifted from not wanting to ask for help because I thought I could manage on my own to thinking that I was somehow less than if I did ask for help. But, as I've learned time and time again, life has a way of forcing you to decide if you want to just survive or if you want to thrive. I decided I wanted to thrive, and that decision meant I had to start asking for help. So I did. I asked for help with my mental health. I asked for help with creative projects. I asked for help with job searching. In asking for help, I've discovered there are people who find joy in providing help. And it's brought me closer to the people I love. Sure, I could make all the desserts for Thanksgiving by myself, but by asking for and accepting help, I get to spend time in the kitchen with my family, chopping this and stirring that as we sing and dance to old school music. I still slip into old habits sometimes, taking on too much or trying to go through something difficult alone when help is just an ask away, but I know that's a part of the process. It takes time to fully transition to a new way of operating. But the key is to keep making the effort to adopt and carry out a new way forward. There is so much freedom in allowing others to help you on the journey of life, in both big ways and small, and I've gained that freedom and so much more by asking for help.

Looking at just a couple of my experiences of liberation, I can see that, in these examples, my liberation has involved others. I think it's fair to say that in many instances and forms, liberation is something we do together. And I think that's really cool and important to remember. I also think that if the Washington Wizards liberated Jordan Poole from his contract, we'd have a better chance at winning more than 15 games this season! But, that's a conversation for another time... Thanks for letting me share my two cents.

WHAT WE'RE READING

with Neely

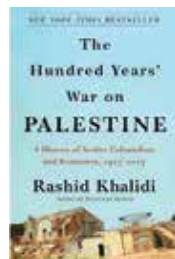
Have you recently read a book that left an impression on you, good or bad? We want to hear about it!

Send us your thoughts (approximately 100 words) and we may feature your book in the next

"What We're Reading."

- **Kelli:** *James* by Percival Everett

I recently read *James* by Percival Everett. Have you ever read (or heard of) *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain? It is a very old book, published in 1884, that told the story of 13-year-old Huck Finn, a white boy who takes off on a raft trip with an enslaved man named Jim. After learning the slave owner is planning to sell him away from his wife and daughter, Jim escapes. *James* is a reimagining of this story from classic literature. In *James*, all of the enslaved people speak a dumbed-down dialect when white people are around, to make themselves sound ignorant. When the white people are out of earshot, though, they speak grammatically perfect English. They are just humoring the white people who seem to need to feel superior. It reminded me of how the toys in the movie *Toy Story* are alive, but just pretend to be inanimate toys when people are around! *James* illuminates the endless horrors of slavery. I finished reading it nearly a week ago and I'm still thinking about it. I highly recommend *James*!



- **Julia:** *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017* by Rashid Khalidi

This was a really informative, eye-opening nonfiction book about the history of the conflict in Palestine and the roles of global superpowers like Great Britain and the United States in the establishment of the state of Israel. I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to learn more about the history of Palestine and resistance to colonialism.



- **Neely:** *Bite by Bite: Nourishments and Jamborees* by Aimee Nezhukumatathil

This book is a fun collection of essays that explore different types of food and the way we attach food to memories and our identities. It was really interesting learning about Nezhukumatathil's experiences with food, like how as a kid she was ashamed when her mom would make her friends a traditional dish from the Philippines called lumpia (she now proudly eats it), or the time she tried the world's sweetest watermelon in Cave City, Arkansas. She also dives into the historical context of some foods, like how cut onions have been left around houses since ancient times as a way to ward off plagues. Each essay is accompanied with beautifully drawn illustrations, and encourages you to reflect on your own relationship with food and the memories you have created with them. There are even some fun writing prompts at the end of the book!

- **Aneka:** *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo

This was by far the most creative poetry novel I've read so far! This coming of age masterpiece utilizes poetry to tell the story of how a young Dominican girl blossoms into a young maturing woman while living in a very religious and restrictive household. What I love most about this book is that it not only challenges our religious beliefs, but it also allows us a look at how youth navigate exploring their identities and their passions. The protagonist Xiomara and her twin brother Xavier are both at an age where they are now ready to date and explore their interests and sexualities, but having a devout Catholic mother can make identity exploration a bit complicated. Watching their relationships with their parents evolve was really interesting but definitely frustrating at times. I would highly recommend this book to anyone who has experienced the burden of teetering on the line between familial obligations and the obligations we owe to ourselves.

CONVERSACIONES DE MENTES LIBRES/ FREE MINDS CONVERSATIONS

Por/By Carlos

"Conversaciones de Mentes Libres" es una sección regular de la revista Connect, donde ofrecemos un artículo escrito en español y luego lo traducimos al inglés. Como sabrán, en 2019 lanzamos Mentes Libres, un club de lectura en español en la Cárcel de DC. Free Minds trabaja para trascender todos los desafíos hacia la verdadera conexión humana y la autoexpresión creativa, incluyendo las barreras de los idiomas! Si hablas español y te gustaría contribuir a esta columna, ¡escríbenos y déjanos saber! Y si no hablas español pero te gustaría aprender, puedes solicitar para poder obtener un libro y comenzar tu aventura de aprendizaje de este idioma.

"Conversaciones de Mentes Libres" (Free Minds Conversations) is a regular feature of the Connect magazine, where we offer an article written in Spanish, and then translate it into English. As you may know, in 2019, we launched Mentes Libres (Free Minds), a book club in Spanish at the DC Jail. Free Minds works to transcend all challenges to true human connection and creative self-expression—including language barriers! If you speak Spanish and would like to contribute to this column, write and let us know! And if you don't speak Spanish but would like to learn, you can request a book and start your language learning adventure (that's "aventura" in Spanish!)

Saludos mi gente! Espero que en el momento de leer este artículo se encuentren con la mejor salud y fuerzas para seguir adelante. Para los que no me conocen, mi nombre es Carlos. Y después de 25 años, recibí alivio en la Corte bajo la ley de IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act) en 2020. Fui deportado a mi país natal: Honduras. Pero tengo el privilegio de comunicarme con ustedes por estos medios y poder conectarnos sin importar la distancia.

El tema para este mes es Liberación. Se me hizo un poco difícil escoger algo para compartir con ustedes con bajo tema. No porque no tengo nada que decir, sino que es tanto que puede decir en relación al tema que se me hizo difícil encontrar algo para compartir con ustedes. Después de estar 25 años en prisión, todo para mí ha sido como una liberación de una forma o otra. Creo que todas las formas de liberación que se me han brindado, la más importante tiene que ser la liberación de mí mismo. Me explico:

Llegué a un país extraño (ya que me fui a la edad de 9 años para los Estados Unidos) con seres queridos que en verdad no conocía. Desde el comienzo, me sentí fuera de lugar y no completamente aceptado como miembro en la misma igualdad. Que me sentía fuera de lugar en este país es otra cosa, otro obstáculo que tengo que conquistar. Pero sentirme fuera de lugar era algo que me molestaba mucho. Empecé a sentirme encarcelado. En los momentos que traté de mantener una buena relación, actuaba completamente diferente y al mismo tiempo, quedaba callado en las cosas que no me gustaban solo por no perder esta nueva familia. Otra cosa, era como si tuviera que depender de ellos en todo. Una de las cosas que prisión dejó en mí es ser independiente. Trate varias veces de comunicar la necesidad de ser entendido. Pero, nunca fui entendido. Hasta mi manera de vestir cambie solo para ser aceptado, mi enfoque fue más en complacerlos. No me confundan, amo mucho a mi familia. Pero era como si me estuviera enjaolando yo mismo. Como que si me estaba poniendo en una prisión. Y por casi 2 años NO me sentí completamente libre. He tenido mis momentos de libertad, como con mi esposa, pero no me siento completamente libre. Comencé a reflexionar en mí mismo, y una de las cosas que me prometí era nunca regresar a prisión. Prisión para mí, no necesariamente tiene que ser una física, sino también prisiones emocionales o mentales. Ponerme a mí primero era lo más importante y lo más saludable para la Liberación de mí.

Empecé a crear una distancia de mi familia. Para mí esa distancia es necesaria. No les voy a mentir, extraño mucho la compañía de la familia, pero la liberación de mí propio ser tiene prioridad. Tengo muchas heridas que la prisión ha dejado en mí, heridas mentales y heridas emocionales. No tener opciones o tener que hacer lo que me digan son cosas que me impresionan. Hoy día me encuentro que estoy aprendiendo no solo de mi país, sino de mí mismo. Elegí ser independiente de todos porque al hacerlo, era reclamar mi libertad, mi propia liberación.

En verdad, me alegro que haya elegido hacerlo porque en el proceso de seguir buscando esa liberación. Verdaderamente he disfrutado mis momentos independientes, he conocido a vivir en este país extraño solo, en este lugar que no ha sido mi casa en mucho tiempo. Verdaderamente me he sentido que en el proceso de mi liberación, he encontrado una paz mental. Una cosa que no tiene precio y eso es tener una liberación completa!

Greetings my people! I hope that at the time of reading this article, you find yourself with the best of health and strength to move forward. For those who don't know me, my name is Carlos. After 25 years, I received relief in Court under the IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act) law in 2020. I was deported to my native country: Honduras. But I have the privilege of communicating with you through these means and being able to connect regardless of the distance.

The theme for this month is "Liberation." It was a little difficult for me to choose something to share with you as a topic. Not because I have nothing to say, but because there is so much that can be said regarding the topic. And something I would like to share is that after spending 25 years in prison, everything for me has been like a liberation in one way or another. I think that of all the forms of liberation that have been offered to me, the most important has to be the liberation of Self. Let me explain:

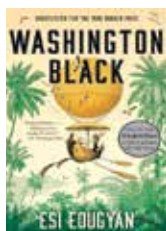
I arrived in a strange country (since I left at the age of 9 to the United States) with loved ones I didn't really know. From the beginning, I felt not fully accepted as an equal. Me feeling out of place in this country is something that bothered me a lot, another obstacle that I have to conquer. I started to feel imprisoned. In the moments when I tried to maintain a good relationship with the people around me, I acted completely differently and at the same time, I stayed silent about the things I didn't like just to not to lose this new family. Another thing I struggled with is I felt like I had to depend on them for everything. One of the things that prison left in me is being independent. I tried several times to communicate the need to be understood. But, I was never understood, even my way of dressing changed just to be accepted, my focus was more on pleasing them. Don't misunderstand me, I love my family very much. But it was like I was caging myself. Like I was putting myself in a prison. And for almost 2 years I did NOT feel completely free. Now I've had moments of freedom, like with my wife, but I didn't feel totally free. I began to reflect on myself, and one of the things I promised myself was to never return to prison. Prison for me does not necessarily have to be a physical one, but also emotional or mental prisons. Putting myself first was the most important and healthiest thing for my Liberation!

I began to create a distance from my family. For me that distance is necessary. I'm not going to lie to you, I really miss the company of family, but the liberation of my own being takes priority. I have many wounds that prison has left in me, mental wounds and emotional wounds. Not having options or having to do what I'm told are things that imprisoned me. Today I find that I am learning, not only about my country, but about myself. I chose to be independent from everyone because by doing so, I am claiming my freedom, my own liberation.

I'm very happy I chose to go on this path of Liberation because in the process you will find that you continue to seek that release. I have truly enjoyed my independent moments. I have gotten to know living in this strange country alone, in this place that has not been my home in a long time. I have truly felt that in the process of my liberation, I have found peace of mind. One thing that is priceless, and that is having a complete liberation!

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club



Washington Black by Esi Edugyan

with Neely



Thank you to everyone who has continued to share their thoughts about our previous Books Across the Miles selection, *Washington Black* by Esi Edugyan. This novel follows the story of George Washington Black as he escapes slavery on a Barbados sugar plantation and travels from Canada, to England, to Morocco in search of what it means to truly be free. We loved being able to hear all of your thoughtful reflections! We printed some of your thoughts in the previous issue, but here are some more additions to the discussion:

1. Wash wanted to capture everything about Bridgetown in his memory so he could draw it later. If you could capture a place you've been, or a memory you hold, forever, what would it be?

CS: If I could capture a place I've been, a memory that I can hold, it would be the day my grandmother held my son and daughter on her lap and she was bouncing them both as they all laughed. I'll hold onto that because my kids didn't have long with her. But me, I had 30 plus years and learned so much from her. Sadly I was/am away when she was called home, but just knowing my kids knew her name is a blessing and a memory I'll hold.

RB: This is both sad (because it happened while in prison) and a great memory. It was family day for the YME (Young Men Emerging) program at the DC jail complex. And there I sat with my mother, my son (who was also locked up) and his mother, surrounded by other families. Although I was in jail, I felt free and it was one of the best days of my life. As my son was born shortly after my incarceration, I've never been free with him. I've never sat at a table and ate with him as a family. I had never taken a picture with him, his mother, and I together. There was music, food, dancing, just a beautiful vibe. And I'll cherish this day/time forever.

2. A book's "setting" refers to the time, place, and environment where a story takes place. What impact do you think Esi Edugyan's choice of settings had on this story?

CS: I think it had a major impact on the story. It was a time when slavery was nearing its end and Wash had a chance to live on both sides, free and enslaved. It showed the trials one went through just to be accepted. First he was Black, then badly bruised and on his own. To be honest I don't know if I could have survived. Great storytelling.

RB: It made it more interesting and aspirational as he was a slave or started off as such. But as he traveled the world, in each setting he became freer and freer as he became more and more into himself and the setting had a lot to do with this.

3. The perspective of Wash is written by Edugyan, who is a female author. Do you think this impacted the way his narrative was told? Do you think it might have been any different if Wash was written from a male perspective?

CS: Yes I think it did impact it. Not badly, but I feel women can better write about women, especially when it comes to feelings and actions. And that goes both ways. I feel if a male would have written

it, it might have been a little more graphic in the seams of life. Not saying it wasn't good, actually it was too good. If I would have written 'certain scenes' it would've been different cause I'm a man.

4. What do you think happened at the end of the book?

RB: Wash and the girl he met (can't remember her name, but the one whose father helped him with his project) got married and he took, or his work, took off, along with his creation.

5. Edugyan shared in an interview that, "I didn't want these abolitionists to be viewed as the great white saviors. It's not just black and white." What do you think of, when you think of abolitionists? Did this book challenge or support the way you view them? If you were unfamiliar with the word before, what does it mean to you now?

CS: I think abolitionists were men and women who just wanted equal rights for all. It wasn't about color or race, it was about being human. Now at the time of the story it was more racial cause of slavery and many people like Titch did not agree with the way the world was spinning and its laws towards Blacks.

RB: When I think about abolitionists. I think about people fighting to do away with a system. For this book, that would be slavery. This book didn't really challenge the way I think of them.

We have a double whammy for Books Across the Miles this issue because we've also started receiving your thoughts on our current book, *Creatures of Passage* by Morowa Yejiḽe. In her novel, Nephthys Kinwell is a taxi driver of sorts in DC, grappling with the death of her twin brother, Osiris. Unknown to her, her estranged great-nephew Dash is dealing with his own traumas that have drawn himself to the same river where Osiris' body was thrown after his murder. At this river, Dash meets a mysterious figure he calls "River Man," which will end up impacting Nephthys' life in ways she never expected. If you weren't able to share your thoughts in time for this issue, don't worry – we'll share more responses in our next issue!



Note that this book deals with child sexual abuse. We encourage readers to prioritize their own mental health if they are not comfortable reading about this subject matter.

1. Yejidé writes about how people living in Anacostia were faced with the “unconquerable presence” of both damnation and glory. Where is a place that you think both damnation and glory are present, and in what way?

PF: The battlefields are places where damnation and glory are present because in battles/war there is always a winner and a loser. Also, unfortunately, schools in the US are places of damnation and glory. With all the mass shootings, schools became places of damnation. But schools are primarily places of glory as the main goal of schools is graduation.

DVJ: I feel like the presence of the kid was the happiest and saddest. But overall, it's a soft spot for me because there's some truth behind this story because this was once Native land and kids and adults suffered at that same river.

2. What words/phrases throughout the book did you notice that made things seem more fantasy than real-life? Did you like this? Why or why not?

DVJ: Not really, I don't like books or movies where little kids get touched on. I mean it happens everyday, but it's just hard for me to cope with, and it kinda messes the book up with the car not needing gas.

PF: In the book Morowa Yedijé uses the words “kingdom” for state, and “fiefdom” for county. It sounds more fantasy than real-life. It didn't bother me as it gives a supernatural dimension to the book as the story talks about spirits and ghosts. There are also a lot of different adjectives used for describing the dawn that adds some mystery: “archipelagic dawn” (p.45), “phosphorous dawn” (p.51), etc. Furthermore, the author also refers a lot to Native American tribes' names.

3. Nephthys' niece (and Dash's mother) Amber Kinwell has dark dreams that tend to come true (often of how people die). The local newspaperman interviews Amber every month for his column “The Lottery.” If such a column existed, would you read it? Why or why not? Do you know anyone who has ever had a dream/vision that came true? Do you believe this happens?

DVJ: Yes I believe this to be true because I see people or things and say this or that and it becomes just that.

PF: As I am very curious I think I would read such a column. But on the other hand, if this column was talking about me or people I know, I am not sure I would like to know what will happen. In the book no names are given in “The Lottery” but the details are often enough to identify somebody. Humans are very ambivalent as they have the curiosity to know the future but the fear of knowing if our last hour is coming. I don't know anybody that has such dreams or visions about the future but I was interested in Nostradamus in the past.

4. After Osiris dies, his rage explodes and he goes on a rampage torturing and killing other souls. Each time he does so, it feeds his anger and creates an even greater desire for revenge. What do you think Yejidé's message is about revenge?

PF: Revenge doesn't fix the past. Forgiving and love are the true values that make us spiritually grow and feel good. It doesn't mean that some people don't deserve to be punished, but it's not our role to judge others, it's the job of the Highest Spirit, whatever we call it (God, Buddha, etc.). When I was reading this book, I was thinking that the title could also be “Broken Souls.”

5. How do you think we as families and a community can do better at listening to and believing children who report abuse?

PF: Young children usually don't lie about abuse. They cannot imagine these kinds of stories and their details, except under the influence of an adult that seeks revenge. These kinds of stories have to be cautiously treated because they're impacting people's lives, especially in the case of wrongful accusations. It's a delicate matter but we should make children comfortable to talk in a safe environment. Developing confidence and self-esteem in children is important. Also we should teach them how adults should respectfully treat them, and what behaviors are not acceptable or not “normal.”

DVJ: By hearing them out. But mainly watching their mood because things affect people in different ways but the way ones act after that is always life damaging.

SPOTLIGHT ON YOUTH FOOTBALL

By Antoine

For many of us rough and tumble youth growing up in Washington, DC (I guess you can say the ‘recreation years’), playing football, whether for your neighborhood school or local recreation, has always been a big thing in every corner of our city. Whether it was touch or tackle, football was the one sport that brought us together – it didn't matter what size you were, there was a spot for everyone on that football field! With the camaraderie, competitiveness, and toughness, both physical and mental, that the pigskin football asked of us all, I believe playing that particular sport contributed a lot to our characters. Even in our later years, bad knees and all, some of us still enjoy some football (maybe flag at my age). Anyhow, so many of us still have nephews, sons, little brothers and cousins who we root for, living vicariously through them, in one of the most exciting sports in the world.

Curious, I recently looked up who were actually the best teams, not just in DC, but in the entire DMV area. I was shocked to see that it wasn't Gonzaga or Dunbar, Carroll... It was Our Lady of Good Counsel High School! A private Catholic college-preparatory high school built in 1958 with an enrollment of about 1,200 students. It was established in 1958 in Olney, Maryland, in Montgomery County. And when it comes to football – Good Counsel is good! Really, really good! Ranked #1 in the DC News Now preseason top ten high school football teams in the DMV for 2024, Good Counsel won the WCAC (Washington Catholic Athletic Conference) title last season with a record of 10-1 and are looking to repeat in 2024. DeMatha Catholic High School for boys located in Hyattsville, MD is ranked second, having lost in the WCAC final two years in a row. Some of Good Counsels' most notable stars include Stephon Diggs and Kendall Fuller, with the latter having had a stint with the Washington Redskins. Good Counsel even ranked nationally! Number 36 in the entire country to be exact. Who would have known such a small school tucked away in the woods of ‘MO’ County would be the team that you hope your team doesn't see!



AROUND THE WORLD: SOUTHEAST ALASKA- INSIDE PASSAGE

By Tara

Even though it was years ago, I will never forget the exhilarating feeling of stepping on to the massive ferry ship that would take me on my very first trip to Alaska. Everything felt so enormous and I felt like I was a real adventurer. I was in my early twenties and I was traveling on my own. The ferry left from the port at Bellingham, Washington and traveled north almost 1000 miles through what is known as the Inside Passage – islands and coastal towns in southeast Alaska. The ferry route is called the Alaska Marine Highway because there is no road that connects these towns. The “highway” is traversed only by ferry ships all along gorgeous waterways besides huge glacial mountains. It took 3 days and I slept outside on the deck in an extended beach chair and a sleeping bag. There were overhead heaters in a partly covered area but most travelers just pitched a small tent out under the stars, which were some of the brightest I have ever seen. I met so many incredible globetrotters on that trip. It was an indescribable and breathtaking experience that I will never forget.

Fast forward to this past June and I found myself stepping on to another huge ship on its way to Alaska. But this time it was a cruise ship and I wasn't sleeping outdoors but in a cabin and had close to 5000 fellow passengers! It was my first time on a cruise ship and I was overwhelmed with the enormity of everything from the amount of luggage loaded on to the amount of food to feed the masses to the number of cruise ship employees from all over the world. I have to say, I still prefer the public transportation of the Alaskan ferry but the amenities are definitely nicer on the cruise ship. They had a rock climbing wall, bumper cars and sky diving in a tube on the top deck!

While the accommodations were vastly different between my two trips, the scenery was the same – absolutely stunning. I can't do it justice by describing it and photos just can't capture it but all I can say is I felt this sensation of really being a part of the natural world. The entire time you are looking at lush green super tall mountains with glacial ice on top and glistening teal water with eagles flying, seals romping, and whales smoothly swimming in the water. The smell of the clean air really sticks with me and the delicious taste of the water from the glacial ice melt.

The ship stopped at the towns along the way and these tiny spots absorbed tens of thousands of tourists all with good nature. Alaskans are known to be pretty independent folks who take a lot of things in stride and I found this to be the case on this trip. We took a small boat and saw lots of whales and relaxed seals lounging. I think I want to come back in my next life as a seal (lots of laying around absorbing the sun and eating fish – though the killer whales think they are a tasty treat too so that could be a bit stressful 😊).

We saw a glacier that had formed thousands of years ago. With the increase in global temperatures more and more of the ice is melting and breaking off. Seeing huge chunks of ice float by in the water that were formed during the last Ice Age and could be tens of thousands of old was pretty mind blowing. We visited a



An iceberg that melted and broke off from a glacier. When an iceberg breaks off it is called calving. Sometimes this process is very loud!



Bumper cars on the cruise ship!

former boom town called Skagway that sprung up because gold was discovered in 1898 and thousands of brave souls flocked there to find their fortune. The majority left with no riches, just debt and exhaustion from an arduous (difficult) trip. I admired their courage and willingness to brave a freezing winter in an unknown land to build a better life for themselves and their families.

We also visited a grove of astonishing towering totem poles carved by Native Alaskans with incredible artistic skills passed down through centuries in Sitka, Alaska. Looking up at these tall carvings I was transported to another dimension of deep communion with the natural world. That spirit is imbued in Alaska and I came home carrying inside of me memories of courageous Native Alaskan communities, beautiful living creatures, wondrous natural scenery, and most of all a reminder to take bold steps in life.

REENTRY PROFILE: CLIFF'S STORY

Interview by Dalton

For our latest reentry profile, I spoke with Free Minds member Cliff. Cliff's story is one of resilience and, ultimately, of liberation: wrongfully imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. He spent decades incarcerated before finally being released. Along the way, he discovered Free Minds, which played a role in shaping his positive outlook, and he developed a strong appreciation for community. Having worked as a coach and a Safe Passage Ambassador for D.C. schoolchildren, Cliff is especially passionate about supporting youth, and in reminding them that they can achieve great things. Our conversation offers glimpses into what freedom and liberation mean in the contexts of the individual, the community, and the broader criminal legal system. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

DALTON: Cliff, would you tell us a bit about yourself, and your Free Minds journey?

CLIFF: I've been a part of Free Minds since 2014. And when someone first mentioned it, I said to myself, I don't write poems. I don't like poems. And so I told her, and she said, "Oh no, it ain't just about writing poems. You can write something about yourself." And I stopped in my tracks. I ended up writing a poem about me going in at 16 years old. At that time I had been in about 30 years. And I wrote, you know, about me. And that got me to stay with Free Minds, going to their sessions, and when people was writing [Write Night comments] on my poems that I was writing, it inspired me to keep writing. Just keep writing, you know: write something different, write something else, always keep writing.

DALTON: Thinking about that habit of writing, I'm wondering about how you cultivated a sense of hope and resilience while incarcerated. How did these feelings factor into your experience, and how did you explore that through writing?

CLIFF: Well, Free Minds gave me motivation to experience joy. Because when they came into the institution, Free Minds staff always showed a lot of joy, you know, and they really inspired you and encouraged you to reach that hope. Hope that one day you will get out, because at first I thought I was never getting out because I knew I didn't commit my crime. So if they built this case against me, how am I going to fight that? So I really thought I was never getting out. But through the writing and the postcards and the Connect magazine, it was all a reminder of you, and your city, and where you're from and hope to be again.

DALTON: And of course, you are here again, thankfully. So what are you up to these days: what motivates you now that you've been released?

CLIFF: With Free Minds, I've been able to go to schools to speak. I've spoken at Georgetown, Howard University, American University, Gallaudet University. And I went to some high schools, some churches. Anywhere where I can share my story, and let the youth know what I've learned. I work at a high school in the city as a Safe Passage Ambassador, and I get a chance to make sure the youth get into school safe and sound, and that they get home, too. So that's what I'm doing right now. And for a while I was coaching little league basketball at the rec center, coaching 11 and 12 year olds. I want to be able to let the next generation know what they can do, and have a role model that's showing them they can achieve big. And I try to do that with my own story.

DALTON: That's such important work, and along those lines, I was wondering if you could share a bit about what the idea of "liberation" means to you. What would you tell, say, a student you work with, what words of wisdom regarding liberation and freedom would you want to pass on?

CLIFF: Well, liberation, it means a lot. I'm still learning how to live on the outside, like responsibilities and things of that nature. To be able to go to the hospital on my own, to go deal with the banks—I'd never been in a bank. So, that's part of liberation, figuring out the new things. But, you know, when you're dealing with that, you have to get help. Trust in people. The most important thing is to know that there are people to help, people we can rely on. Don't let it frustrate you into giving up, because sometimes it can be hard. I don't want you to not live the rest of your life out the best as you possibly can. So to be really free means you got to change, got to rely on others sometimes, got to work together. But give the good a chance. And that means, if you get knocked down, get up. And find the people who can help you. But also be the person who helps when you can. We're in all of this together, we gotta help each other. And that's what liberation can be.



A glacier with pieces of ice breaking off and floating away. A glacier is an extremely slow moving ice river!



A whale tail as seen from the boat. Their tale is called a fluke.



Totem pole in Sitka National Park



Alaskan Ferry on the Alaska Marine Highway

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NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: COMMUNITY

By Julia

For the fifth and final issue of 2024 (!), we are diving into a favorite topic here at Free Minds: Community. Last year we actually celebrated our 20th anniversary as an organization, and we named our celebratory event "The Power of Community." That idea—the power of community—is embedded in everything we do. Here at Free Minds, we would be nothing without our community, including our members, staff, volunteers, and friends in DC and beyond. You may have heard the old saying "no man is an island," and we see the truth of that in our work every day.

*Not a single one of us could do what we do alone. And I personally believe that community connections are the antidote to so many ills in society! Too often, we may feel isolated or alone in what we're going through, or people might be so focused on their own individual experiences that they don't reach out to others, or don't see others reaching out to them. I know I have been guilty of that myself! So for this issue, we want to **focus on those connections that build us up and strengthen us all**. We want to hear all about the communities you belong to, and what community means to you. Most of all, **how can we keep showing up for each other in our Free Minds community?***

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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