

August/September 2014  
Vol. 3, Issue III

# Free Minds Connect

**THIS MONTH'S THEME:**  
*If I Knew Then...*



*If I Knew Then*

*What I Knew Now...*

## **IN THIS ISSUE...**

**No money for  
commissary?  
Ask HF!  
(page 5)**

**Free Minds Profile:  
Outreach Coordinator  
Sherman on his success  
after prison (page 6)**

**Credit Trouble:  
How to clean up  
a financial mess  
(page 8)**

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Want to be on this list?

Write or draw some-  
thing and send it to us!

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**Next Issue's  
Theme:**

**Hope**

What things give you  
hope in your life?  
Why do you feel hope  
is important to have?

Happy Fall Free Minds Family! I hope this Connect finds you well in both body, spirit and mind. A big thank you to those of you who sent us your goals and dreams as part of last theme. We love reading them and being a partner with you in making them a reality. I like to think of Free Minds as an incubator of ideas! Keep them coming.

This issue's theme "If I knew then what I know now I would have..." has given me so much enjoyment and knowledge I can't tell you. As you all know one of my favorite things to do is to learn about people and I love asking them questions. (I've even been called the InTARAgator only in a loving way. Ha ha) This issue gave me a great excuse to ask away!

I asked Free Minds members who are home, friends, family, Write Night volunteers and nonprofit colleagues the question "If you knew then what you know now what would you have done differently" and the answers I got was like getting a handbook of golden advice that made me think more deeply about my life now and how I want to be. So lucky. I'll share some of them here. (write and ask me for the full list and I'll mail to you as it too long to print here!)

**"If I knew then what I know now**

...I wouldn't have started smoking because I can't stop and it's killing me literally.

...I would have trusted my gut and not gone out with that guy who hit me

...I would not have cared what other people thought so much and pursued my passion for acting instead of going into business

...that my friend was using drugs I would have never gotten in the car with him

...I would have traveled abroad in college and before I had my kids

...I would have worried less and had more confidence in myself in grade school

...I would have gotten a breast reduction ten years earlier

...I would have gone to the doctor when I knew something was wrong but was afraid to find out what it was so I could have been treated earlier.

...I would not have moved in with my best friend because it ruined our friendship

As they say hindsight is 20/20 and as many of you wrote what you experienced made you who you are. And that's how you learned. I just wish sometimes I didn't have to learn the "hard way" and do things differently by seeing others' mistakes! but think that's life sometimes. We heard from several of you after receiving this topic that the experiences you went through formed who you are and gave you important life lessons so it was ok to not "know". Talk about a positive attitude and making the best of situations. I love it. I have to admit I'd rather know to avoid the hard consequences ☺ but realize all life is learning lessons.

Life is also about change and we have some here at the Free Minds office as our wonderful Sarah has gone on to fulfill a dream of hers to be a teacher at a school in DC. (see her article on p. 3) We miss her terribly in the office but as you know once a Free Minds always a Free Minds. Lifetime membership!

And she stays in touch and just saw her at the last Write Night which was great. Can't thank her enough what she has brought to Free Minds with her generous, compassionate spirit and amazing writing ability. Kelli will now take over as Editor of the Connect so look out for some new changes and improvements. As always want your suggestions on how to best make this a

publication that you can really use. One change is we are going to focus even more on reentry resources and profiles of folks who have successfully come home from prison and reintegrated.

Finally, I've had a big change in my own life that my relationship of nine years with my partner Mark has come to an end. Many of you know him and how much he helped Free Minds. It has been really hard and I am incredibly sad. It's going to take awhile to process it all and heal up from the grief but know that one day I will. I will also see that we were together for a reason to become the people we were meant to become. We were are on two different life paths but I have to admit I'm very tempted to say "If I knew then ... I wouldn't have gone out with him!" to save myself all this pain but I know that's not true and I'm so grateful to all he has brought into my life. Life is a roller coaster of pain and joy and I think to fully experience the joy we need to experience that pain I think.

Thank you all for being on the journey together with me on this thing called life.

Until next time — Tara  
*May the long time sun shine upon you*

*All love surround you*

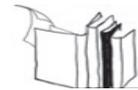
*And the pure light within guide your way on*

## FREE MINDS HQ



Hi Free Minds! This is Maddie, here with your FM Headquarters update ☺ We've been having an eventful summer here at the office—here's a little snapshot of what we've been up to!

- Do you remember reading about the "Ban the Box" bill in the "Persistence" issue of the *Connect*? (It is basically a bill that will get rid of the little box on job applications that make you check off if you've had a felony.) Well, very recently, it passed into law! This is BIG news, because it's a huge step towards ending job discrimination for ex-offenders. FM Outreach Coordinator, Sherman (who's featured in this *Connect* by the way!) did an interview with NPR about the bill.
- We've been taking weekly yoga classes this summer, generously donated by FM friend and yoga instructor Sophia. It's definitely made us feel much more refreshed, relaxed, and uplifted here at the office!
- A unique part about Free Minds is that literacy and education are very important issues to us. That's why we were excited when Tara spoke at an informative panel in Washington, DC about the positive effects that reading and writing can have on a smooth reentry back home, along with several other experts about the topic!



## A SPECIAL NOTE FROM SARAH

Dear Free Minds Members,

I write to you this month with some big news. Beginning in August, I will be starting a new job at an independent middle and high school in DC. Do you remember last issue's Connect theme, *Dreams*? Well, one of my dreams has always been to work in a school. I know that this is a great opportunity for me to make that dream a reality, and to hopefully go on to help many more young people learn and grow. However, this is also a bittersweet moment for me, as it means I will no longer be working in the Free Minds office.

This month's theme "If I knew then..." really speaks to me, because it is all about reflecting on our past and thinking about how it has influenced our present and future. While making this transition (Tara says I'm not allowed to say I am leaving, just transitioning! Once a Free Mind, always a Free Mind, right? ☺), I have spent a lot of time thinking about my journey with Free Minds these past two years. When I think back to when I first started working at Free Minds, there are so many things I didn't know! And there are so many memories and experiences I have gained since joining the Free Minds team. Looking back when I first moved to DC after graduating college, I had no idea:

- ...That I would become a passionate advocate for incarcerated youth and for prison reform
- ...That I would fall in love with DC with all its amazing neighborhoods and beautiful sites
- ...That every day I would have the opportunity to read and respond to poetry written by some of the bravest and most talented writers the world has ever seen (that's you guys!)
- ...That I would meet a group of incredible young men who continually inspire me with your courage, hope, transformation, and wisdom

I could go on and on forever, but the main point is this: though I am going on to pursue my dream of being a teacher, it is really *you all* who have taught me.

As I transition from Free Minds, know that the *Connect*, your poems, and your letters are in very good hands! Our old intern Cienna will be filling in for me as a temporary replacement, and our new Volunteer Coordinator (and a PDS lawyer for some of you!) Seana will be starting in October.

If anyone wants to keep in touch, you can still email me on corrlinks at [sarah@freemindsbookclub.org](mailto:sarah@freemindsbookclub.org) or send a message along to me via the office! Plus, I still plan to be at all the Write Nights so keep sending those poems in!! Nothing would make me happier than the opportunity to comment on your new writing ☺ And know that no matter where I go from here, the Free Minds family is NEVER far from my mind and heart!

Your friend,  
Sarah

## JG'S WORDS OF WISDOM

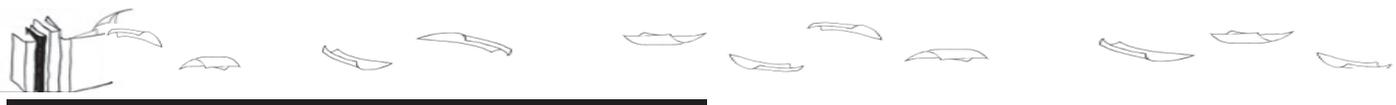
*By JG, Free Minds Member in Federal Prison*

If I knew then what I know now, the things of the material world wouldn't have had so much allure over me. I would've understood and appreciated the value of education, because I would've known that true education is the means by which individuals cultivate themselves mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. I would've known and understood the interconnectedness of every living thing; thus, I wouldn't have been so quick to hurt, harm, or deceive my fellow brother and sister, because I would've known that in order to do that I would first have to hurt, harm, or deceive myself. If I knew then what I know now, my future would've been



much brighter because I would've already been connected to my foremothers and forefathers, grounded in their lessons and principles, as opposed to intentionally misguided, lost, and left to perpetuate the confusion, disunity, and self-hatred that had become my mental condition. If I knew then what I know now, I wouldn't have been in the habit of consuming all of the poisons and toxins that led to diabetes, heart disease, dementia, cancers, and any other physical, emotional, and mental diseases. Now that I know the things that I should've known then, I have begun to set the foundation for future generations by leading by example.





# THE WRITE WAY

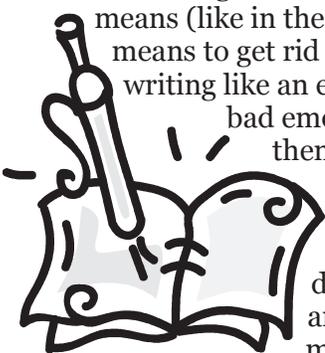
## Journaling

By FM Writing Guru Julia

Hello Free Minds! Today I want to talk about journaling, and how that can help you free your mind and improve your writing at the same time. Writing is like a muscle—it needs to be exercised! When you don't use a muscle for a long time, it atrophies. To **atrophy** means to weaken. For example, if you didn't stand up for weeks, your leg muscles would atrophy and you would have trouble walking after that. The same thing can happen with writing—if you don't use your writing muscles for a long time, it can be difficult (though definitely still possible!) to start writing again. The best way to exercise your writing is to try to write something every day, even if it's just a few sentences and even if you don't show it to anybody. The important thing is that you are putting words on paper. If you were on a sports team, you would practice your sport every day, so you can think of this as your practice for writing.

When I was 16, I took my first writing class, and the teacher told us to write in a journal as often as possible. Now it's been years, and I've been writing in a journal ever since! Writing in a journal (or **journaling**) helps you practice your writing. Maybe you don't finish a poem all in one day, but if you're writing in a journal (or on any paper you have), then you can write down ideas for that poem and keep going until you finish.

Journaling also helps you keep your mind free and clear of stress. Sometimes when you are in a tough situation, you don't feel like you can talk to the people around you, but you can always talk to your journal. By writing down what you're thinking or feeling, you can brainstorm a solution to your problem or just feel better for having said it. Do you know what **exorcism**



means (like in the movie *The Exorcist*)? It means to get rid of an evil spirit. Think of writing like an exorcism—by writing down the bad emotions, you are **exorcising** them. I speak from personal experience. When I was in high school, a friend of mine committed suicide and I didn't feel like I could talk to anybody about it, but because my writing teacher had told me

to write in a journal, that's exactly what I did. It didn't bring my friend back and it didn't magically make things better, but it did allow me to exorcise the bad thoughts and free my own mind so I could deal with her death.

So here's my advice to you: write something today. Write what you wish you could say. You don't have to share this with anyone, it's just for you. It doesn't matter what you write, just so long as you write something!

### Writing Exercises

*If you could talk to one person right now, what would you want to tell them?*

*Who do people see when they look at you? Who do you want them to see?*

### BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS:

*Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie. This book is a love story between two young Nigerians. It's also about the main character's experience as an African woman who moves to America and discovers race and racism, which she had never encountered before in Nigeria where everyone was black. This book is long, but it was a page-turner and I loved every minute of reading it. Five stars! ☆☆☆☆

### "If I knew then..."

#### Word Search

L	A	X	M	K	M	N	W	A	P	L	R	C	E	V
E	E	D	J	U	Y	E	Q	D	P	O	U	H	H	N
T	B	S	Q	D	E	V	H	A	B	R	B	A	O	B
Z	H	R	S	C	Q	X	S	S	H	T	E	N	O	O
S	L	O	X	O	Y	T	T	W	Y	N	G	G	F	N
O	E	U	U	O	N	A	P	N	K	O	I	E	H	E
L	V	C	J	G	C	S	I	A	Y	C	N	M	H	D
O	H	D	I	L	H	T	W	O	N	K	N	X	L	B
S	U	A	E	O	S	T	F	O	R	G	I	V	E	X
Q	W	S	P	E	H	I	F	O	X	F	N	E	V	T
D	H	G	D	R	B	C	U	U	G	F	G	W	H	F
H	T	G	N	E	R	T	S	F	L	Q	S	X	W	B
V	O	K	D	S	U	I	S	B	N	L	X	Y	E	I
P	Z	Y	P	C	Q	N	L	H	E	T	Y	J	P	E
K	Q	L	Y	E	J	J	Y	E	N	U	Q	T	K	N

#### BEGINNINGS

CHANGE  
CHOICES  
CONTROL  
DESTINY  
FORGIVE

#### KNOW

LESSONS  
OBSTACLES  
PAST  
STRENGTH  
THOUGHTFULLY



## ASK HF: ADVICE FROM THE INSIDE

HF is a Free Minds Friend doing a long bid in the Feds. Send him your questions about doing time, family, loved ones, or anything else and he will answer you in his column!



***“I’m in transit on my way to the feds and I don’t have anyone that will give me money for commissary. I’m worried. What can I do?”***

First, you have to understand seriously the difference between “needs” and “wants.” Everything that you “need”—food, water, clothes, shelter—all of these things will be given to you for free by the FBOP. Even soap, toothpaste, and stamps are given to inmates that are indigent and have no funds in their commissary account.

Secondly, everyone in the FBOP has to have a job. Therefore, if you need money to obtain the things that you “want,” then proceed to find you a job in the prison that will put a few dollars in your account. Work hard to get the job, and work even harder when you get it. Your good work ethic will always lead to more opportunities to make more money.

Plus, there are a lot of honest side hustles in the Feds like ironing clothes, cleaning rooms, personal fitness training, poetry and letter writing, and GED tutoring that people will pay you to do for them. I have a guy that pays me to teach him Arabic grammar.

Lastly, just remember that you will be given everything that you “need” by the prison staff, so it is no need for you to rush and appear desperate to go to commissary. I have seen older guys that make \$500 per month at the prison industries never go to the commissary and are released with over twenty thousand dollars (\$20,000) in their accounts. Work hard for what you want and do not beg anyone for anything ever!

## *Enlightenment of my Day Dreaming*

By DR

No ex, no recrimination, no hate, no indignation  
Truth is my muse  
Born into a maliciously-created milieu  
Tainted with every conceivable social ill  
That induces iniquity for sufficient meals  
I manifested in bone & flesh  
Infused with strong blood  
Amidst rapacious miscreants I evolved  
A man-child in an unpromising land  
Plagued with ignorance, genocide, & debauchery  
Becoming another morsel for the belly of the  
beast....  
Inevitably!  
Here I am now, fulfilling my American-made  
destiny  
Living vicariously through magazines, pictures,  
fables, and  
The music of Jay-Z!  
Yet I promise it won’t end as expected  
Because now I know  
Know who I am  
And who I can (and will) be  
World get ready for the real me....!

(Factorial the negative past, with a positive  
Outlook on my future)

*It is never too late to be  
what you might have become. –George Eliot*





## “IF I KNEW THEN...” CONNECT PROFILE: SHERMAN JUSTICE

*Sherman Justice brings his five years in adult prison and his personal transformation to his current work of mentoring young men. As a fellow for the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation and the Outreach Coordinator for Free Minds, he serves as a positive influence in many returning members' lives. Free Minds intern Maddie sat down with Sherman to discuss his successful reentry.*

### **Can you tell us about your childhood and any pressures you may have faced growing up?**

I had a lot of pressure growing up in my childhood. I came up in a single-parent home and my mom had to work from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. I have three brothers and I'm the oldest so I had to watch them, I had to cook, I had to grow up at a young age. At like 11 I was already babysitting my brothers all night. By the age of 13, I started to see like "Hey man, we ain't growin' up right." I didn't have a lot of clothes like the other kids had and I didn't have any money. At school I got free lunch and stuff like that. I wanted some shoes and stuff so I could be like the other cool kids in class. [My mom] told me I could get the shoes if I got the grades, so I tried to get the grades and I did get the grades. When I came back home from school with the good grades she was like "Son, I can't get the shoes. I want you to write down how much the bills are," so I wrote down how much the bills were, and then she told me to write down how much she made, and the number came up negative. So I started to hang out with the people in my neighborhood that were running around, stealing cars, robbing people and stuff like that. I was just hangin' around the wrong crowd and doing the wrong things.

### **What are some obstacles that you've encountered and how have you overcome them? What is the hardest part of reentry?**

A lot of the obstacles that I've faced upon being released from prison were about trying to find employment. When I got out, I didn't know what type of job I would work. Also I had a probation officer because I was on parole, so it was an obstacle having somebody over your back trying to see if you're doing things right. And then there was peer pressure from friends. Some of my friends were making a lot of money doing the wrong things. It was challenging just to have the pressure of not fitting in with what my old friends were doing while living in the same neighborhood. I had to live there and be around these people that were doing these certain things and not hang with them. It was hard because some of them stayed in contact with me for five years and then when I got out I had to tell them, "Hey, I don't do that no more." Also a big thing for me was employment. I went everywhere and tried to get a job, but nobody was hiring me so I had to work like the lowest job on the totem pole. I had to work in heat that was so hot that I had to change the clothes I worked in from sweating too much. I was at the warehouse and I had to wear all this equipment. And how I overcame everything, I had this son and I had a baby on the way right before I did five years. So when I came out, my son was five so I knew I had to take care of him and I didn't want to be like my father who was never there. I just kept putting my son in my mind and I hung around good people. I hung around older people that had been through what I had been through. Also, I went and volunteered my time. I went and talked to certain kids and was in the Big Brother organization in Columbus, Ohio. I just tried to stay motivated and stayed doing positive things and positive things happened to me.

### **The theme of this issue is "If I Knew Then..."**

#### **Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently in the past?**

Oh yes, I mean there were a lot of things that I would have done differently. Looking back, I would have been more of a leader instead of a follower. A lot of times I got so caught up in the materialistic things that I lost track of the good person that I was when I was young. When I was younger, everybody was like "Man Sherman, you're so smart, you're so athletic." I had so many coaches and I chose to hang with people that I thought were cool rather than hang around and listen to what coaches told me, like "Hey man, practice, do this." But I just thought I was so good that I didn't need practice, that I'd just get on a court and play. I thought they would keep giving me passing grades, like "You don't gotta do this, you're still gonna play." But when I got to high school it was a different story. They told me, "If you don't have a 2.5 grade point average or higher you can't play." So, soon as I didn't make the grades, I just stopped playing sports. So if I could go back, I would take school more seriously cause I know how important education is.

#### **What strategies have you used to stay off the streets?**

A strategy that I used to stay away from my friends and do the right things is remembering how it was when I was in jail. I thought about the cells and I thought about all the times that I was like "Look I'm locked up with all men, who wants to be around all men talking about nothing for five years?" I thought about all the times that I was like "When I get out, I'm going to do this" so that I had a memory. Usually when people get out of jail, you lose track of all of that and you just get so caught up in what you're doing that you never think about where you came from. And God did it—I prayed a lot and I started going to church. I never really went to church and stuff like that when I was young except on Easter, but I prayed and I just asked God and told him I wanted to do something. And I showed him by my *actions* that I wanted to do something different. So it was God and for real, it was on me—I just wanted to do something different.

#### **What advice do you have for guys coming back in the community?**

I always ask them "Do you like jail?" I always start off with that and they always tell me no, so then I ask them "What are you going to do to not go back to jail?" And if they try to give me some bull stuff about "Oh imma just sell weed instead of selling crack because it's less time," well I tell them "You're still going to jail period." So a lot of advice that I give them is to look back to where they were at and look at where they are now. A lot of people don't know how to look back to where they were and look at it now, it's just something that is just hard to do. I also tell them "What would you tell yourself now that you didn't tell yourself before?" I get them talking and I always tell people to get a mentor. That's how I made it, I had a mentor for everything: I had a mentor that was from the streets, I had a mentor that wasn't from the streets. It's important to just handle different types of people and be versatile you know? Try new things, get different exposure on different types of things, use your phone for something other than Instagram, Google stuff you know what I mean? Try to find out who you are, try to find out the real you, and stop wearing a mask.



# IN THE NEWS

By FM Friend John

## World News

We are sad to report that the world is a very, very unstable place these days. Three major conflicts have emerged in recent months:

First, there is the situation in Ukraine. There are people in certain parts of the country that wish to rebel against the Ukraine, separate and become part of Russia. In late July, one armed group of rebels used a high-tech weapon to shoot down a commercial airliner flying over Ukraine, killing the hundreds of people aboard.

Russia has denied that they are helping those rebels with weapons, and the situation remains extremely tense.

Second is renewed violence in Israel and Palestine, a decades-old conflict that pits the Jewish state of Israel against a neighbor mostly populated by Muslims. Israel is heavily armed, where Palestine is impoverished and has little formal military strength.

The most recent spike in violence started when a Palestinian group called Hamas murdered three Israeli youths. Since then, Israel has pelted Palestinian territory with missile strikes, killing hundreds of Palestinians.

Third, and perhaps most serious for the United States, is the occupation of part of Iraq by an extreme Islamic group known as ISIS. How extreme? Al-Qaeda cut them off years ago because the Al-Qaeda leadership felt ISIS was too violent.

ISIS wishes to become the center of the Muslim faith, and it rules with zero tolerance for anything other than religious law. The group will execute non-Muslims in the territory. The United States is trying to figure out how to help those people, and any other person who wants to be free of ISIS' control, without engaging in yet another military conflict in Iraq.

## DC News

Not much going on in the Chocolate City these days! The mayoral race will come down to two D.C. council members in November. One is Muriel Bowser, who won the Democratic primary over current mayor Vincent Gray. The other is David Catania, who is running as an independent candidate.

In late June, the city celebrated its 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Jazz Festival, which took place along the Anacostia River in the beautiful Yards Park.

This year's festival carried a New Orleans theme to it. Along with a week of local and national acts performing all over town, the final weekend included Trombone Shorty (who frequently performs with rapper Juvenile in New Orleans) and Rebirth Brass Band.

## Redskins Season Preview

The Capitals and the Wizards are both still off for the summer, and won't get back to preseason until next month. The Washington Nationals are one of the hottest teams in baseball and are looking like a squad that will contend for the World Series in the fall. But we know what you want to hear about:

*How are the Washington Redskins going to be?*

Well, it's the NFL, so the short answer is that you NEVER know anymore. It has been ten years since a team won the Super Bowl two times in a row, and it seems like every year, some team that absolutely stinks comes out of nowhere for a run in the playoffs.

Could this year's "out of nowhere" team be the Redskins? Here are the reasons to be hopeful:



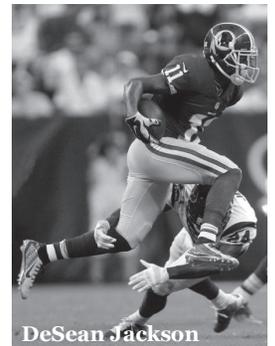
Robert Griffin III

**Third year is a charm:** Cam Newton set the league on fire his first season, was terrible his second season, then became an elite quarterback last year in his third season.

Can RG3 shake off a rough year in which he came back from an injury too soon, and was then benched later in the year by a coach who has since been fired? Absolutely. He has the talent and accuracy to be an elite quarterback in the NFL.

**New Weapons and Healthy Stars:** The offense around RG3 looks stable, and better, than it did last year. Alfred Morris will be motivated to return to his rookie level performance, and Pierre Garcon returns. Jordan Reed was strong at tight end toward the end of last year, and it looks like he could emerge as a favorite target of RG3. And perhaps most important of all, the Redskins' phenomenal lineman Trent Williams is back and healthy.

But the big news going into 2014 is the new guy, DeSean Jackson. The Redskins brought him in after Philadelphia cut him, and he is already among the most visible stars in the DMV. If he lives up to his potential, the RG3/DeSean connection could be talked about for years to come in Washington.



DeSean Jackson

Now, all of that needs to translate into a potent offense, and that offense needs to keep the Redskins' average defense off the field. The Redskins will be vulnerable against the league's best passers with an untested set of cornerbacks and safeties. Fans must hope for the outside linebackers, Brian Orakpo and Ryan Kerrigan, to terrorize offensive backfields.





# CAREER CORNER

The UDC Community College Division of Workforce provides DC residents with job skills and training to help pave a path to employment. The organization focuses on those industries that have jobs available in the DC metro area. The industries that are most in demand include:

- *Construction and Property Management*
- *Healthcare*
- *Hospitality and Tourism*
- *Information Technology and Office Administration*
- *Transportation*

There are several locations in DC:

801 North Capitol – 202-274-5800

Bertie Backus – 202-274-7209

Marion Shadd – 202-274-5617

PR Harris – 202-274-6999

United Medical Center – 202-576-6854

This training is free to all DC residents. Please note that many of these certification classes require you to have your GED. If this is an issue for you, please see the below list of organizations where you can obtain your GED:

Center for Empowerment and Employment Training  
600 W Street NE  
Washington DC, 20002  
202-832-4070

YWCA  
2303 14<sup>th</sup> Street NW Ste #100  
Washington DC 20009  
202-626-0700 ext. 729

Coming home in the next 6 months? Write us a letter or give us a call at 202-758-0829 so we can help you plan for reentry!

## Reentry Spotlight

*By FM Reentry and Outreach Manager Keela*

Your “credit” tells people how likely you are to pay back your loans. It is an important aspect of your life to consider, as it is used not only for lending decisions, but sometimes also for insurance or employment approvals. You can fall into bad credit by failing to pay back your credit cards or loans. In this article, Ms. Keela talks about her personal experience with bad credit and the steps she used to repair it.

If I knew then that wrecking my credit would so profoundly affect my quality of life, I would have guarded it with intense responsibility. I know that credit is a subject most of us wish to avoid, because we don’t really get it, and it’s not “fun” to talk about. However, educating yourself about credit is very important, and that’s putting it lightly. As I’m typing, just visualize me jumping up and down pleading with you to please heed to this advice (yes, it’s that serious). You see, when I was younger and people tried to advise me on this matter, I only half listened and I am now paying dearly. How am I paying you want to know? My credit score is in the “poor” range. I desperately want to accomplish the American Dream and purchase a home, which, ironically, is now easier to do with our current administration. However, my hands are tied due to the very poor decisions I made regarding my credit. It’s like I now have the mental maturity it takes to be a homeowner (I lost my first home to foreclosure in 2009), but my credit score won’t allow it. It’s like running a race to receive the winning ribbon at the end, but once you cross the finish line and you reach out to take hold of the ribbon, the person holding it moves it out of your grasp.

I could go on and on about credit because I know how easy it is to mess it up and the discipline it takes to repair it. Cleaning up your credit is not easy, but it’s certainly achievable, at a cost. You can either fix it yourself, or hire a company to do it for you. I have chosen the latter. Repairing it on your own will take a great deal of time, effort and discipline, and if I had the time and discipline, I would certainly save my money and do it on my own. Hiring a credit repair company isn’t easy either—you have to do your research because there are so many people and fake companies on the prowl looking for uneducated and desperate people to scam. I am relieved to say that I have found a legitimate company and am now on the road to clean credit and my dream home! My goal is to be moving in March 2015. There is so much I would like to add to this, but for the sake of space I will leave you with a very precious piece of advice concerning your credit: please, please, please be proactive with your credit; guard it like your life because it will always profoundly affect the quality of your life, and above all, EDUCATE YOURSELF!!!

## CREDIT TROUBLE



# INTERVIEW WITH CHARLIE



*Free Minds member Charlie is Lead Poet Ambassador for our Violence Prevention Outreach and goes every week to New Beginnings (the old Oak Hill) to teach poetry to the youth there. He shares with us his tips for a successful reentry.*

**Free Minds:** How long did you serve? How long have you been home?

**CC:** I served for 5 ½ years and have been home for 20 months.

**FM:** What have been your biggest challenges since you've been home?

**C:** Finding a job. I got interviews, but I never got a call back. Some people treated me nice in the interview, but some people didn't. I just brushed it off—you gotta keep your head up and keep moving.

**FM:** What do you wish you'd known when you first came home? What advice would you tell yourself?

**C:** I wish I had a trade when I came out. I wish I had taken classes when I was in prison.

**FM:** What have been your biggest successes?

**C:** I got my own place. I been there about 16 months.

**FM:** You have been very successful with your probation officer. How have you created such a positive relationship?

**C:** I do everything he asks me to do. I respect him and he does the same with me.

**FM:** You're a new father. Congratulations! Tell us what that experience has been like, and how does that affect your goals?

**C:** It's been good. It's changed my perspective on things. It makes me want to push harder towards my goals of finding a job and furthering my education.

**FM:** Do you ever get tempted to go back to the street life? How do you deal with that?

**C:** Yeah, I get tempted every day. But when I think about where I came from, that keeps me from going back. I don't like to get told what to do—when to go to sleep, when to eat, when I can watch TV, when I can come and go. I don't ever want to go back [to prison].

**FM:** Why do you go to 'New Beginnings' and talk to the kids in the juvenile center?

**C:** Well, because I was once down there before and I think out of all the kids, you are going to get one or two with your words. You'll reach them with what you're saying.

**FM:** If you could give one piece of advice to Free Minds members coming home, what would it be?

**C:** Make some goals. If you don't plan, you plan to fail. Get a job, get your own place, get a car.

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## “If I Knew Then...”

*By FM Member DR*

If I knew then what I know now, I would not have evolved to be the man I am now...

As I would not have made the mistakes or allowed myself to be subjected to the adversity and pain that evinced from the depths of experience all of the necessary ingredients for my requisite growth;

So I would change nothing!

Struggle is a prerequisite for success with substance...





# AROUND THE WORLD...

## A TALE OF TWO CITIES

By Free Minds Intern Olivia

Hi Free Minds Family,

In September 2011 I moved to Manchester, England from my hometown of Arlington, VA to attend the University of Manchester. I had never been to England before in my life, but I packed up pretty much everything I owned, stuffed it in two suitcases, got on a plane, and went. It was the only college I had applied to—I was so determined to go because the University of Manchester is the only college in the world that offers a course in what I wanted to do: applied theatre. Applied theatre just means that I make plays with people who aren't professional actors, such as men in prison (a lot like Free Minds!). I currently work with young people who have offended, young men who are homeless, and young men who work as prostitutes. England is one of the only English-speaking countries that regularly use the arts as a part of rehabilitation programs in prison. Unfortunately, prisons still focus on punishing people rather than giving them the support they need to make changes that will help them to not re-offend, but the applied theatre groups that I work for are working hard to change that.

Manchester is in northwest England, about two hours north of London. It's a city of about 500,000 people who have emigrated from more countries than you can imagine (to give you an idea, I taught at a school where the students spoke over 45 different languages!). So you would think that Manchester would be a rich mishmash of different cultures and traditions. However, if I asked the average person in Manchester to describe someone who lives in Manchester, or a "Mancunian," they would probably just describe a working class white guy with a thick, barely understandable accent. I guess this isn't that surprising, since a whopping 80% of English people are white.

So you have two Manchesters: one is white and working class, the other is incredibly racially and culturally diverse. I'm a white girl living in an Indian neighborhood—I stuck out for a while, but I love where I live. Right down the street from me is something called "The Curry Mile." It's like stepping onto a street in urban India, with Hindi music, rich perfumes and spices, and shops selling Indian food and clothing. But a ten minute bus ride later, you can be in the funky Northern Quarter, full of independent retailers, vintage shops, proper British tea rooms, record stores and unique bars. A two minute walk away you are in the city center, full of chain stores and a million different street performers. My favorite is a pop-up rock band that plays with rat masks on their heads! Turn a corner and you are in the Gay Village; turn another, you are in Chinatown; turn another, you are in Moss Side. Hop a tram, and 15 minutes later you are at Old Trafford, where Manchester United, one of the most famous soccer teams in the world, plays. Get back on the tram, you can ride back in town to industrial district Deansgate.

I know people who spent their entire time living in Manchester never going off the main road that runs from the university to the city center. It's very easy to get stuck living like that if you are afraid to explore and encounter people from other races, cultures, and backgrounds. For instance, my best friend grew up in Manchester, and he had never met a black person in his entire life! Manchester is a beautiful, complicated, fascinating town that you really have to explore to begin to understand. Do you think that could apply to your own hometown? What do you think you could discover (or have already discovered) outside your neighborhood?

### QUOTE-I-VATOR

"We are products of our past, but we don't have to be prisoners of it." –Rick Warren

"I wish I had known that education is the key. That knowledge is power. Now I pick up books and watch educational shows with my husband. I'm seeing how knowledge can elevate you." –Mary J. Blige

"I wish people would love everybody else the way they love me. It would be a better world." –Muhammad Ali

"Forgiving isn't something you do for someone else. It's something you do for yourself. It's saying, 'You're not important enough to have a stranglehold on me.' It's saying, 'You don't get to trap me in the past. I am worthy of a future.'" –Jodi Picoult

"My scars remind me that I did indeed survive my deepest wounds. That in itself is an accomplishment. And they

bring to mind something else, too. They remind me that the damage life has inflicted on me has, in many places, left me stronger and more resilient. What hurt me in the past has actually made me better equipped to face the present." –Steve Goodier

"Time don't change people. People change in time."  
–FM Member AL

"The strongest man is not one who acts off his desires, but one who act from the heart, and do goodly deeds."  
–FM Member WM

Please feel free to send us your own inspirational quotes like members AL and WM did, and we'll feature them in our upcoming issues of the *Connect!*





# PAY IT FORWARD

This month for our “Pay It Forward” activism column we wanted to highlight the Judge our Youth campaign (or JOY for short) that is taking place in Washington, DC. The JOY campaign is a movement that is working to make important changes for youth in the adult criminal justice system. It was started in May 2014 by the DC Lawyers for Youth and the Campaign for Youth Justice. The campaign promotes a few significant things, mostly through a bill called the Youth Offender Accountability and Rehabilitation Act: 1) preventing juveniles from being held in adult jails before their trial, 2) ending the practice “once an adult, always an adult” (so, say someone is charged as an adult at age 16, then is released, and then commits a less serious crime at age 17. They would automatically be charged as an adult for the second crime, even though it may be minor, because they are already in the prison system as an adult), and 3) giving all juveniles who have been tried as an adult the chance to have an adult court judge carefully review what system would be most appropriate for them to be placed. *By Maddie, Free Minds Intern*

Even though it’s pretty new, the JOY campaign has already accomplished a lot! First, it published an important, detailed report called “Capital City Correction: Reforming DC’s Use of Adult Incarceration Against Youth,” which has gained a lot of public attention. There is also an online petition that 257 people have already signed. If you agree with it, tell your family and friends to sign it at [www.dclj.org](http://www.dclj.org)!

A great, effective way to help the JOY campaign is by writing a letter to Councilmen Tommy Wells and Jim Graham. They are on City Council and introduced the Youth Offender Accountability and Rehabilitation Act mentioned earlier. You can write about your own experiences of being in an adult prison system as a juvenile and why it is important to give youths all the benefits of the juvenile system. If you do write a letter, you can send it over to Free Minds and we will make sure it gets to the right people!

Or, you can write us a one or two sentence quote about why you think the JOY campaign is important, and we can forward it to the organizers to use in upcoming protests.

We hope you choose to write! This *Connect* is all about reflecting on the past in order to make better decisions in the future—by voicing your personal stories, we hope that DC politicians can use others’ past experiences to make meaningful laws for the future.

## From Our Write Night Volunteers on “If I Knew Then...”

If I knew then that ‘normal’ was boring, I would have embraced *all* of me sooner.

If I knew then what I know now, I’d have stuck it out because if you follow your heart and stay true to it, things really do turn out in the direction you want.

Looking back to when I was younger, I should have been bolder and stood up more for what I believe in. If I only knew then.

If I knew then that everything I said and did could hurt or help other people, I would have been much more careful with their feelings.

If I knew then what I know now, I would have made the most of my childhood, when you imagine that everything is possible and your creativity knows no bounds.

If I knew then that it makes people feel good to be asked for help, I would have asked for more advice!

Looking back, I wish I shared my story more to help others. A closed mouth gives nothing. If I only knew then.

If I knew then what I know now, I’d feel more hopeful and excited, rather than anxious. I’d know that things get better the more you learn about yourself and the more you grow.

Looking back, some things don’t last forever—and that’s okay. If I only knew then.

## *Take Heed* By FM Member MH

If somehow, some way I could go back, I would have one hell of a conversation with myself. Looking at a younger me, I know for a fact I would listen. That’s always been my strong suit: to listen. But the million dollar question would be if I took heed and that’s when I totally look at the younger me. I’m not going to say I was “gone” but something close to it. I just did not care and the only real focus was on money and funning. This younger me became wild by taking unnecessary risks and over time, this thought process became an addictive habit. By 15, I couldn’t even picture 18. So, if I could go back and holler at myself, would I even recognize an older me? Besides, by the looks I can honestly say I would not believe it was me. Then I realize everything that I would say, somebody already told me before! But if I did listen to myself, by now (8 years later) I would have anything I wanted. Someone once said, “It’s not your aim but your target” and I would go back and change so many of my targets. I would lift the blinders off my eyes and expose myself to so many different avenues. But honestly, I see the younger me replying, “Yeah, I hear you” and actually meaning it. But would I really take heed? And the answer I feel is “no.” The ironic part is the older me would respect that because without the experience, I would not even be able to have this conversation. Through this exercise, I even grasped some wisdom. Even though I can’t rewind the hands of time and have this conversation, I can have it now with myself. With all the experience and knowledge, I can honestly say that I now would listen and take heed.





## **“If I Knew Then...”**

*By FM Member DJ*

If I knew then what I know now, I wouldn't have been involved in a life of crime. The fast money I made when I was a teen wound up being very, very slow money at the end, because the wages you make in jail are slave wages. And the time that you are locked up is a waste of time, even though you can read and learn more. You can spend that time on the street with your family and friends learning or doing something else. A lot of people gave me good advice but some of it I didn't listen to. A lot of people gave me bad advice and I learned from all my mistakes along the way. I can't really say that I would have done everything different because a lot of my mistakes I've learned lessons from, and those lessons helped save my life and gave me knowledge and experience that made me who I am today. A smart person learns from their mistakes, but a wise person learns from others' mistakes.

## **Tasting the Bitter**

*By FM Member MT*

Thinking back when I was a kid, I always had older people tell me to stay out of the streets. I even knew older people that were incarcerated and been through what the streets have to offer, which isn't much. But when you're young, a lot of the times it goes through one ear and out the other. To be 100% honest, everything that the older guys used to tell me was true, I just didn't take the time out and let the information sink in. When we're young we always think that we know it all when we really don't. So that is why a lot of younger guys including me end up incarcerated.

There is a saying that applies to this: “He who has not tasted the bitter does not understand the sweet.” For me, I had to taste the bitter to really understand the sweet. Incarceration for me is the bitter. Living life on the outside world is the sweet, which I have another chance to experience in one and a half years from now. I know I will take full advantage of my freedom because a lot of other younger people in here are not getting a second chance.

So to sum all this up: if I knew then what I know now, I would have listened and finished high school, which is something that is supposed to be the best years of your life, and which I never got to experience. Also, I would have applied to a college so I would have had a good chance in job opportunities. I would have kept my time more occupied with girls and sports to leave all the other non-important stuff out. Because at the end of the day, goodwill eventually pays off with time, so it's worth it.

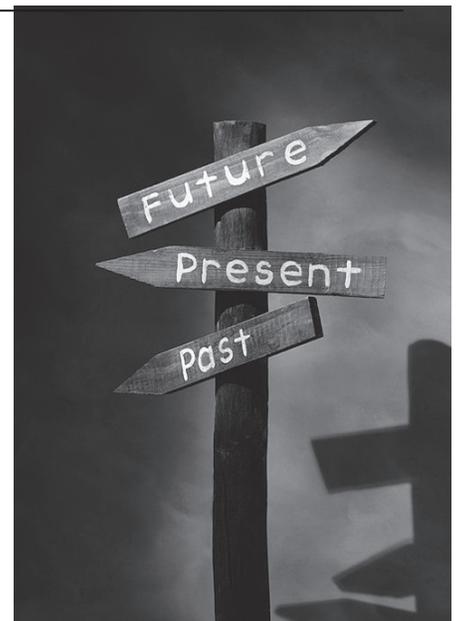
If I knew then what I know now, I would have never went down that path that eventually got me incarcerated. So thank you for listening.

## **“If I Knew Then...”**

*By FM Member RK*

Think back to when you were a kid. If you knew then what you know now, how do you think things would be different?

My first thought from reading this was, “Why would I think about something that cannot be?” Going through the things I've been through made me who I am today. Even if that could happen I would not change anything, not even my time. Getting 59 years may have been one of the best things in my life. Crazy right!!! From 16 to 22 I've become something 85% of the world could never understand. In doing that memories would not have been made. Lessons would not have been learned. Most of all I would not be writing to Free Minds at 2:30 in the morning. LOL! My level of understanding is very high now. My mind and body are free and healthy. Would my life be different? Yes, but at the same time we all would miss out on a lot of beautiful things and people who need help in life.



# VETERAN VOLUNTEER FINDS PURPOSE AT FREE MINDS

By Free Minds Friend Lauren

*The following is an interview with Ethan, a longtime Free Minds volunteer who has participated in Write Nights ever since they began.*

**Free Minds:** When and why did you first become involved with Write Night and Free Minds?

**Ethan:** I found out about Free Minds through an old acquaintance of mine. She invited me to an event one evening and I thought it would be great to attend. I was inspired. Young men who had been incarcerated were sharing the intimate details of their struggles in poetry! I love poetry, so it's always nice to hear some being read aloud. Months later, I asked the same person if there was anything going on with the Book Club and she directed me to the website. I attended a Free Minds happy hour on U Street and was informed of the new initiative: Write Night. It sounded like a brilliant idea for raising awareness about mass incarceration and supporting young people who need it most.

**FM:** What has changed since you began volunteering?

**E:** Five years later, I'm thrilled and amazed to see how much Write Night has grown! There were only a handful of volunteers when I started to volunteer. Now, I can barely find a seat!

**FM:** What lessons have you learned while volunteering for Free Minds?

**E:** These young people need to be supported because ALL young people need encouragement. All people need support, no matter what. They also need to know that they can be successful and whole in the face of constant messaging of the contrary. Young black American children, especially from marginalized communities, often do not have the support networks a lot of other people take for granted. To charge juveniles as adults is stupid as well as inhumane. We know now that a teenager's prefrontal cortex is not fully developed; therefore, decision-making skills may be weak. It's also no coincidence that a disproportionate number of these young people are black and Latino. Race and class remain two of America's most faithful demons.

**FM:** What would you say to others who are considering coming to Write Night?

**E:** Write Night allows the public to see the human stories behind the statistics. It's also a wonderful experience for those who believe in the transformative power of art. Tara is a human dynamo! She works so hard to promote the mission of Free Minds, while maintaining a positive, yet realistic attitude.

**FM:** How is this program changing the Washington, D.C. community?

**E:** I am proud and excited to be a Write Night volunteer! I've met folks from all walks of life at the events, committed to social justice and charity. I can't wait to see what's next for the Book Club!

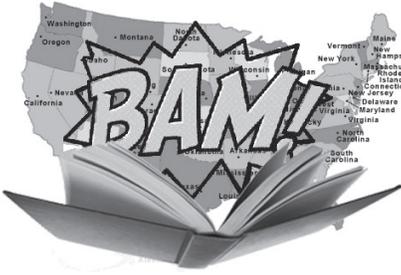
## Spotlight On: Mini-Libraries

By Free Minds Intern Maddie

Hi Free Minds! I'm writing today to highlight a literary awareness effort that has been sweeping the country: mini libraries! Unlike public libraries, which are big, self-contained buildings run by the government, mini libraries are typically found on the street and contain just a small shelf or two of books. Anyone can start a mini library! The idea is that you can take a book for free from one of these mini libraries—you don't even have to return it like in a regular library! But the one rule is that if you take a book, you must replace it with another book of your own. This cycle helps to encourage everyone in the community to read, and also helps to guarantee that the mini library is always filled with interesting finds! Consider starting a mini library in your prison—after all, one book can help change someone's life! Think about possibly taking woodworking classes to help construct a shelf, and then fill it with books and spread the word in your unit. After all, one book can change someone's life! And remember, Free Minds is always here to help if you want us to send you any books ☺



## BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!



Hey F.M.B.s (Free Minds Brothers!)

You are all on my mind. I hope that each of you knows that I would not be who I am without you. Your strength, resilience, and desire to keep learning, growing, improving, and giving back to the world truly keeps me going.

So let's talk about the most recent BAM book, Letters to an Incarcerated Brother. Some of you were skeptical at first. After all, Hill Harper is a "rich movie star" who has never been incarcerated. How could he possibly write a book about being incarcerated, right? When he visited the juvenile unit last fall, many of the young guys felt the same way. By the end though, it was all daps and hugs and autographs. His genuine belief in the possibility of their transformation if only they believed it too was infectious. We had guys telling Hill that one day, he would hear about them and it would be because of their success, not their arrests!

Here is what Free Minds member W.M. said: *"I am currently reading Letters to an Incarcerated Brother. Can't describe how inspiring it is, also I still have to keep the book going. I try to hold on to the good ones 'cause when you transfer you can only take a few books. But...I want you to know that you are changing people's lives by just a simple inspirational book."*

I took a big piece of his message to heart and have put it into practice. Hill really stressed the importance of having a concrete plan. You can't get anywhere if you don't have a road map!

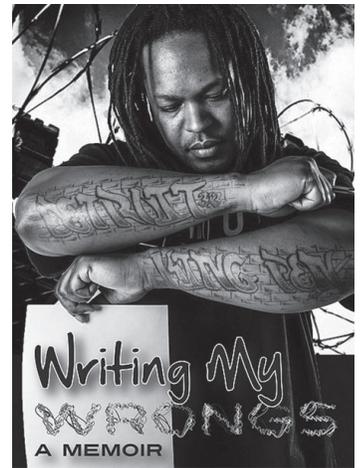
So our next BAM title WRITING MY WRONGS, IS by someone who has been locked up. Shaka Senghor was incarcerated for 19 years, including 4 1/2 served in the hole. He was characterized as an animal by the prison staff and feared by other inmates, his childhood marred by divorce, drug addiction and gun violence. Senghor says: "While [in the hole], I unpacked and addressed the baggage from my childhood and my years on the streets selling drugs and discovered the tools I needed to free myself from the prison of my mind. Guilt, shame, anger, self-doubt and hopelessness kept me from reaching my full potential. However, once I changed my thinking and decided my life was bigger than any prison cell they could put me in, I began doing the work needed to break free mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

Senghor is now an award-winning author who is on a national speaking tour. His message: our past does not define us and positive change is absolutely possible!

WRITING MY WRONGS is coming soon to a mailbox near you! And as always with BAM books, I want to hear from you!

Until then, as always, keep your mind free and keep facing towards the sun!

Your friend always,  
Kelli



## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: **Hope**

What does the word "hope" mean to you? Hope allows us to push ahead through obstacles and look towards a brighter future. What things give you hope in your life? Why do you feel hope is important to have? Send us your poems, essays, articles, and drawings about hope and how it plays a role in your life. We can't wait to hear from you!