

Feather Bricks Mission Statement: We provide brave spaces to celebrate creative, encouraging, and instructive expressions.



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Cover Art by Hollywood Rifraf

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

My name is Carail Weeks, known as ACE by my peers. The rumors are true: I'm now a Freshman in Lewis University's program at Sheridan. The journey was challenging to reach this point in my life to further my education, mostly due to the invisible chains so far I've created for myself.

I wish everyone could've seen the smile on my mother's heart when she found out I got accepted into college. She jumped for joy in the visiting room when I shared the news.

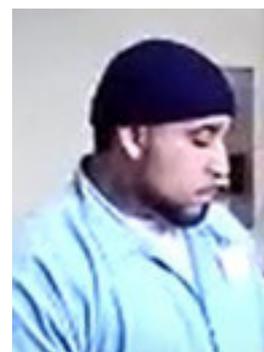
I want to thank both of my Teachers and Teaching Fellows at Stateville. Of course, I can't forget all my brothers that encouraged me along the way. I thank all of you for your help, and I will not disappoint you on earning my Bachelor's degree.



**Carail Weeks**

Editor's Note...

Initially, I was not feeling the idea of buying a ticket and taking a flight, considering all of the things that have been happening with planes lately. They don't make them like they used to! Now that I am up in the air with Lewis University Flyers, I am really enjoying the view. Being up so high is a means to a bigger picture of continued self-actualization, and my experience so far has impacted my being. I am a firm believer that education is a major ingredient to the formula for the cure to many societal ills, and it is most definitely changing lives within the confines of prison walls. Some of us are not where we should be, but thank God we ain't where we used to be. Many of us were teenagers when we were sent to prison, and we waited decades for the opportunity for higher education. It was worth the wait. --Jose Vidaurri



**Jose Vidaurri**

Well, Fellas, look what the wind blew in. It's Spree, fresh off the G4, just landing in the editor's seat for the first edition coming from the second squad of Lewis University! This *Feather Bricks* issue is about intros and conclusions. Many of us believed when the judge gave us these crazy sentences that it was the end. But Brothers and Sisters, I'm here to tell you it was the beginning of a connecting flight back home. We are just in a weather delay, the storm is passing, and the layover is finally over. The traffic controller is signaling the plane to taxi on the runway. Flyers, are you ready to board your flight? We are departing from IDOC, destination freedom!

--Dwayne McCoy Sr. (Spree)



**Dwayne McCoy**



**WRITE ON!**

# LETTERS TO & FROM OUR ANCESTORS



Letter from Our Ancestors: Class Collaboration

By Lewis University “Squad 2 Students” in ENG110 “The Essay” Course

*Note: ENG110 Teaching Fellow **Alex Negrón** facilitated an in-class writing workshop that resulted in the composition below. Each member of the class contributed one sentence, including the Professor. Can you tell which sentence belongs to which member of the squad?*

The beats sound off from continent to continent, across the ocean in waves carried by the winds. A lot of disconnections early in life, and maybe before I was born, have led to your disinterest. The same sun shines on each of us without having lost any eternal energy. We were most likely some kind of colonizers somewhere, and we danced the pagan polka before it was named that. I taste the salt water in my mouth, so forgive the stutter in my speech. I ask: what is our true belief? Listen, Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Great Grandson, I was picking cotton and I seen her clear as water in a glass jar. I left the comforts of home to secure my own immortality. Where exactly does the word Helmann’s come from? Is it even earthly? What are our intentions — to take over the world one sandwich at a time? Treat your mother with great care and have no regrets, so when the time comes, there is nothing left unsaid... nothing left undone. I will always hear the voices of my people no matter where you are in this life or the next. Our Lord, grant me guidance and forgiveness, that I may not offend you or your ways. Yes, we were ancient warriors from the great jungles and hunted for our food and battled other tribes. I been calling on you for your entire life, long before you even knew about me, knew about yourself, knew about us. I always had faith that you would seek me out. I am sure that my ancestors look at me with the same confusion.

“Letters To My Ancestors” By **Mike Bogmenko**

“Hello great, great grandfather.” I ask my ancestor from my mother’s side, “What part of this world am I really from? Am I from the Aztec culture, war and family warriors? Did we help build the Ancient pyramids? Can I have proof from my grandfather from Jalisco, Mexico that we are from there?”

“Yes, we were ancient warriors from the great jungles, and we hunted for our food and battled other tribes from what is now called Mexico.” I hear my ancestor commanding me, telling me, to be strong and get back with your tribe on the outside and help them rebuild the New Tribe from strength within the family. Then I close my eyes again and begin to ask my ancestor from my father’s side, “Where am I really from?” I begin with asking my great, great Grandmother, “Where am I really from? Where did my roots really come from?”

I then sense and smell a perfume coming from my room, and creaks coming from the old wooden floors. I hear a woman whispering to me, telling me to *come here* in the Ukrainian Slavic language. She was telling me that I came from a Ukrainian and Mongolian town in Eastern Europe. And they were reindeer farmers, and hunters. They lived in igloos and got most of their meat from the reindeers, and used their skins from them and made clothing with them. They used tools and weapons from the armies of Ghenghis Khan, a great Mongolian Warrior who fought for these lands against other Asian and European countries. They fought against the Russians and against the Ukrainians, who were also fighting over land.

So, one day she was hunting her reindeer and she was ambushed by her enemies--A whole army of Mongolian soldiers ruled by Ghenghis Khan! She was the only Ukrainian woman in the village. So they kidnapped her and took her to their village in what is now called Mongolia. They tied her up and tortured and raped her until she told them where the rest of the Ukrainian soldiers were. After that, she was untied and bathed and clothed in Mongolian clothing, then fed some goulash with reindeer meat. And she was given homemade vodka to drink with her meal. A month later, she found out that she was pregnant from one of the Mongolian soldiers. The Mongolian women in the village knew she was pregnant, so they told Ghenghis Khan to return her to the village that she came from. So they did! When she arrived, she saw her village was destroyed and burned to a crisp. There were still a couple of my ancestors left so they rebuilt the village further down the Ukrainian border and then my great, great, great uncle was born! Then others started generations of Bogmenko families, that soon migrated to America, traveling through Alaska, and Canada, all the way to Chicago, IL. So she told me to be a strong Mongolian soldier and Ukrainian farmer in blood, and build the family tree!

# LETTERS TO & FROM OUR ANCESTORS

My Ancestors  
by **Kenneth "Twin" Nelson**

Dear Readers,

*I would like to introduce you to this great fiction about my ancestors. In this imaginary story you will hear questions and answers of my great 6x ancestors. So please open your minds, buckle your seat-belts, listen and enjoy the ride.*

"Hey great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather, how are you today? I was just wondering how you began your journey on creating this dysfunctional family? Were you a slave? Is my last name a slave master's name? What brought you in to my great, great, great, great, great, great grandmother? Did you like or love her? What was your age when you left this earth? Where were you? Did you have any regrets? Did you have an education? What was great, great, great, great, great, granny like? Please ask great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather to come back?"

"Listen great, great, great, great, great, great grandson, my journey began way back yonder. It was the late 1800's when I laid eyes on this beautiful rose. It was the only one in the field that stood out. I was picking cotton and I seen her clear as the water in a glass jar. She stared at me for a brief second, before Master came riding his carriage. I knew at that moment she was the one.

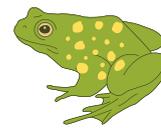
WAIT A MINUTE, great, great, great, great, great, great, grandson--the family wasn't dysfunctional. We were a close-knit family. We did everything together, until master sold me to some prancy chicken-fighting family out in Philadelphia. Your last name is definitely a slave master's name. Back in those days that was common to be named after the family you served. Most of us (slaves) held slave owners' last names. But don't get it twisted; I always knew my family name. And I made sure my family knew it too. I loved your great, great, great, great, great, great grandmother. She was a seamstress. She sewed all of master's kids' clothes and other slave owners' clothes. She made 0.001 cent for every dress she made.

It may not seem like much now, but back then it kept food in our mouths. I didn't have much of an education, but I knew how to count. I made sure my three children knew how to count as well as read. When master would go into town, his daughter, little Maryanne, would be sitting under the tree with my daughter. She used to read and teach Sandra, word for word, and I would listen while picking cotton in 100 degree weather. "It was hot!!" So Maryanne would have a bucket of water straight from the well in the front yard. As soon as master's carriage hit the gravel, little O' Maryanne would give us water and little treats. Master didn't allow us to drink water until we were done picking at sunset. And at that time we only had a paper fan that little Maryanne gave us.

Let me tell you great 6x grandson, I never had regrets and you shouldn't either; you know why? Because at one point you wanted it. You wanted whatever you desired. Grandson, you have to be smart. You have to love yourself and family. You must protect them and show them the way. Extend our legacy. We all we got. I did that for 97 years. I was 97 years and 4 months and 13 days old when I passed away. People would love to have lived as long as me. So great 6x grandson don't cry. Don't cry for me, for I have lived a long life. So until we meet again, so long great 6x grandson."

*Now readers, as you just digest my first fiction about my ancestors, I would love your honest feedback and some pointers you think I need to adjust my full potential. Thank you for your time and ears. You now have an insight of my imagination of my ancestors.*

The Inherent Magic of Objects  
By **Jose Vidaurri**



It is theorized that trauma and susceptibility to vices can be impressed upon DNA and passed down to future generations. Impressions on the soul can come in all shapes, sizes, and places. Some come from great acts of valor. Others come from honorable self-sacrifices and extreme acts of kindness, in spite of the impressions of trauma. And those acts do not have to be loud and on a stage for all to see and celebrate, but are usually the small things that leave the biggest life-changing impressions. One small thing that has left a deep, lasting and life-changing impression on me was the coquí that my abuela sent me.

I have a small green coquí tree frog with faded yellow spots. My coquí is only about a half an inch long, and that's being generous. It suffers from a broken arm so I put Scotch tape over and around it, that I peeled off of a letter I received from my abuela in 2003. My coquí is old and beat up from a lifetime of being locked up. It has a stain on its right foot. You can still see my coquí's big black eyes, staring back with a lifetime of wisdom. Underneath its belly and legs is a stain that only comes with age and time. The Scotch tape is holding my coquí together. The tape itself is old and tattered, encasing my coquí almost like a makeshift body bag. Maybe more like a mummification to preserve my coquí for all of the past years, as well as the years to come. There is dirt and who knows what else stuck along the edges of the Scotch tape. A preservation of the sands of time, but more likely potato chip and honey bun crumbs ground down very finely to dust. Maybe even some loose tobacco dust.

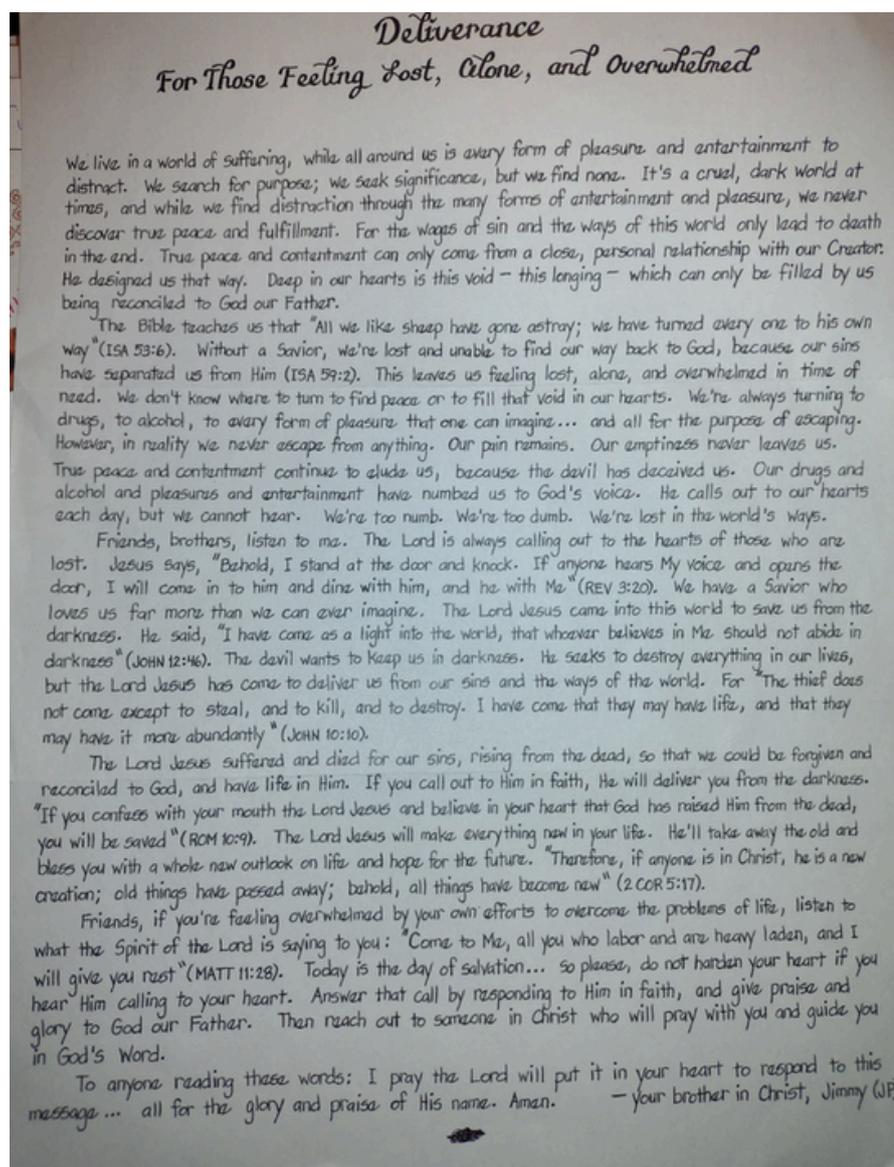
There are many common things in life that people take for granted but remind me of my coquí. When I am fortunate enough to get a visit from friends and family, a simple vending machine soda pop reminds me of her. It brings me to a time when I lived with her in Arizona, and she had a soda pop vending machine in front of the house. My coquí had two poodles that she loved and spoiled to death! Baby and Filomena. The two lucky dogs are long gone, but naturally dogs remind me of my coquí tree frog.

A trip to the barber shop always makes me think about how she would always want me to look good. Once a week when I was a kid, she would give me money to hit the barber show and get faded up. As a kid, I always wanted to go swimming, so imagine my elation when my coquí purchased a home with an inground swimming pool! Diving board and everything!

My coquí had almost a century of wisdom and experience: sharing the things that most people don't give any thought. If she was physically here today, she would say a lot of things that she forgot or couldn't say before. She would apologize to me for breaking her promise, thinking that she somehow did not protect or support me in some way. My coquí has absolutely nothing to apologize for, but that is just who she was. In case you haven't realized it yet, if my coquí had toes, she would be ten toes down. Someone else would look at my coquí and not think twice about it. Some may see my coquí and not recognize any value in her, and would toss her in the trash, never thinking about her again.

To me, my coquí meant the world. She was beautiful and she was mine, and I have a rich and deep history with her. My coquí was sent to me as an act of deep and rich love and support. My coquí was sent to me as an act of expression, to bring a form of connection and familiarity during a very long walk in a valley that is blanketed in a never-ending shadow. It was an act of love that gave me a lasting impression of liberty and solidarity. One that I could live and relive, as many times as I need to. What I remember about my coquí is her laughter. I still hear it today. My coquí was full of thoughtfulness, but don't get it twisted. She was old school and strict. When she spoke her own form of articulation, it was an expression of individualism. My coquí's Spanish was first nature, and very fluid in her deliverance. Her broken English was second nature, but only as a means of connection to those she loved and cared about. I can still hear her now, yelling at me because she thought I was talking back. "Ju zayzomzing!"

I am blessed and a better man because I was fortunate enough to love and be loved by my coquí. Over the years she took great care of me, watching over and praying for me. When I fell down the deep dark rabbit hole of mass incarceration, she followed me there. Who would have thought that one of my greatest companions through the valley of the shadow of death would be a tiny green coquí tree frog with faded yellow spots.



"Deliverance" By Jimmy Pitsonbarger



## Reflections on Jeremiah 20:7-18 by **Karen McCarron**

I chose this passage because it reflected my spiritual and emotional state in a traumatic time in my life; my faith then became a rollercoaster of defiant praise and cursing. It is well-known that trauma and mental illness affect people's spirituality and their walk with God. Even a prophet such as Jeremiah was affected by his circumstances, and he struggled to maintain his faith in a loving God. Jeremiah 20:7-18 contains the last two of Jeremiah's "confessions" or laments, and these two laments are smashed up against each other in a schizophrenic way. Both laments speak of how people enduring trauma and severe ongoing loss both cling to and curse God simultaneously. Interestingly, God has a similar oscillating pattern throughout the book of Jeremiah 1. This passage ultimately serves as a model of prayer for the broken that will help them survive and move forward toward rebuilding one's faith and one's community.

In a close reading of the passage, one first is confronted with language with sexual overtones in verse 7. Jeremiah complains of having been seduced or even raped by God. Jeremiah complains that he is an object of ridicule because of God. Jeremiah cries out as an innocent sufferer; his job as a prophet has brought him disgrace (v. 8). Jeremiah's personal frustration in dealing with an irresistible urge to speak (v. 9) is compounded by external opposition (v. 10). The prophet's support system has collapsed, and his friends mock him with the slogan of his own message: "Terror is on every side!" Verse 11 is a statement of confidence that God is a warrior and harkens back to Jeremiah's call (1:8 and 19):

- Do not be afraid of anyone, for I will be with you to rescue you.
- They will fight against you but never prevail over you, since I am with you to rescue you.

Jeremiah's complaint is cast as a legal case before God (v. 12), and he wants to see God's vengeance on his tormentors. Jeremiah then issues a praise ("Praise the LORD, for he rescues the life of the needy from evil people" (CSB)) in the midst of lament (v. 13). Then, in v. 14-15 the prophet is self-cursing; or, this may not be Jeremiah's curse but a standard outcry made by people caught in calamity. Cursing the day of one's birth stops short of cursing God. Praise followed immediately by cursing presents a schizophrenic prophet that is wrestling with his faith and is in emotional turmoil. Also, the cursing may describe an entirely different time/occasion and editors or the scribe juxtaposed the emotions/prayers on two different occasions next to each other. In v. 16, the cities referred to are Sodom and Gomorrah. In vs 17-18, the prophet, in his vexation of spirit, would have preferred to be still born or unborn. This is very Job-like (Job 3). The womb imagery ironically recalls the origin of the prophetic mission (1:5). Jeremiah's two final laments have no divine response. The death wish in v. 20 arises not only out of personal despair - "the dark night of the soul," but also because of the stark scene the city faces. Jeremiah prophesied during Judah's last forty years (627-586 BC). Jeremiah foretold the fall of Judah amidst many false prophets who preached the people were safe.

One of the unique features of the book of Jeremiah is that this prophet provides a penetrative look into his personal thoughts and reactions. The book does this especially through its laments. Laments have the following components: address, complaint, expression of confidence, petition, and concluding praise. Not all components are used all the time, as noted in v. 13-18, which definitely has no praise, petition or expression of confidence. In Jeremiah Chapters 2-38 are sermons and laments delivered before the fall of Judah. Chapter 2-20 contain general prophecies and are not necessarily given a time of delivery; whereas, chapters 21-39 contain prophecies that are specific and do give a time of their delivery in the first words of each chapter. Chapter 14 vividly depicts a drought. The drought was so severe that all came to a standstill because of the downturn in the economy (14: 3). Famine follows drought, and it is uncertain the timing of the passage in Chapter 20 in relation to the severe drought mentioned in 14.

The context of the 2 laments in Chap. 20 is that Pashur the priest reacted very negatively to Jeremiah's words against Judah/Jerusalem. Pashur had the prophet beaten and put in stocks. After Jeremiah was released, the prophet pronounced judgment against Pashur - not because Pashur imprisoned and beat him, but because Pashur was one of the false prophets that repeatedly announced the continued safety and prosperity of Jerusalem and Judah. Jeremiah stated God would give the priest a new name, which meant "Terror on Every Side." This meant that Pashur and his family would experience the siege of Jerusalem and Pashur would die in captivity. Interestingly, the name "Terror on

Every Side” is a reversal of the name Pashur, which though Egyptian, in Aramaic might mean “Fruitful on Every Side.” Babylon is also mentioned for the first time in Chap. 20 and will be Pashur’s destiny and the destiny of many in Judah.

As a currently incarcerated person ministering to others who are also incarcerated, Jeremiah’s laments resonate with us. The laments are “prayers for people mired in loss.” Jeremiah sees, foretells the doom of Judah and attempts to warn his people of the coming Babylonian invasion. Seeing visions and hearing God tell of this destruction would be very traumatic and anxiety provoking. Even though the destruction has not yet occurred in Chap 20, Jeremiah must already have PTSD – way before the Babylonians arrive, the ongoing trauma of knowing doom is coming and no one can stop it – not through prayer nor, in the end, through even a few repenting – would disrupt anyone’s faith in God, the world, and people. It is in this context that Jeremiah laments and shares his despair and doubts that even the identity of Israelite faith will survive. I agree with scholar Kathleen O’Connor in that these laments are confessions of faith because in the midst of profound suffering, they cling fiercely to God, even though they complain, whine, and berate God as they keep relationship alive.

Jeremiah, like anyone who suffers with great loss and trauma, wrestles with a theodicy. Although the confessions repeat the rhetoric that it is the people’s responsibility for their destruction, the laments also dispute and resist this simultaneously. The laments upset the simplistic theology that reduces all causes of disaster to human sinfulness. Jeremiah invites us into his inner world of despair and anger and shows us a more complex way – how to keep communication with God alive in the midst of destruction and despair. Jeremiah embraces complexity and that there are no easy answers to “Why?”

As we befriend the innocent among us, as we suffer with the severely ill that are locked up, and as we see women and children suffer in Gaza and Ukraine who certainly were not sinful enough to deserve their fate –how can we explain that a loving God exists? First of all, I have found in these moments of deep suffering, theological discussions should be off the table – unless the sufferer asks the “Why” Question. If this happens, keep your response short and simply state that you do not know “why” and move on to the following (if the person accepts this and does not want a full theological conversation):

1. Food. Invite them to a meal
2. Make a simple statement that they are admired, inspiring and beautiful without making a eulogy.
3. Make a simple statement of gratitude for their friendship without being nosy and have an interest in their life outside of the trauma, illness, and battle they are enduring
4. Give a hug.
5. Empathize. Validate them on how hard this is and that “Yes, it sucks!” Stare down the ugliness and sadness with them. This is entirely countercultural. Jeremiah’s enemies and false prophets were very much like the modern day prosperity gospel preaches who do not want to hear negative confessions.
6. Silence.

The book of Jeremiah, especially his laments, is the antithesis of the American Prosperity Gospel movement, and as Christians that can handle complexity, we can model how to handle the unanswerable Whys – through authentic expression of emotion/reality and surrender. St. Teresa of Avila once said: “We can only learn to know ourselves and do what we can – namely surrender our will and fulfill God’s will in us.” Bowler writes: For Christians not of the prosperity persuasion, surrender is a virtue; the writings of the saints are full of commands to “let go” and to submit yourself to what seems to be the will of the Almighty. All of American culture and pop psychology scream against that. Never give up on your dreams! Just keep knocking that door is about to open! Jeremiah, like Job, is a model on how to face trauma, disaster and the unanswerable whys - (our own suffering and those that suffer around us) - in an authentic way.

#### Sources Consulted:

- 1 Abraham J. Heschel, “Jeremiah,” *The Prophets*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 138.
- 2 Elmer A. Martens, “Jeremiah,” *Baker Illustrated Study Bible (CSB)*, Eds. Gary Burge, J. Scott Duvall, J. Daniel Hays, Andrew E. Hill, and Tremper Longman, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018), 1403-1405.
- 3 Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 367.
- 4 Louis Stalman, “Jeremiah” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV)*, Ed. Michael D. Coogan, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018), 1105.
- 5 Allan B. Stringfellow, “Jeremiah,” *Through the Bible in One Year*, (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2014), 89.
- 6 Elmes A. Martens, *Baker*, 1391.
- 7 *Ibid*, 1403.
- 8 Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Lamenting Back to Life,” *Interpretation* (Jan 2008), 34.
- 9 *Ibid*, 36.
- 10 *Ibid*, 38-40.
- 11 Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason And Other Lies I’ve Loved*, (New York: Random House, 2018), 173-175.
- 12 *Ibid*, 86.



The following texts were originally written as assignments in spring 2024 for ENG110:

Word Prompt: Dreams

By Dwayne “Spree” McCoy

*Author’s Note: As I look through The Sentences that Create Us to find a prompt to write about, I choose the writing, “On using small stories to illuminate big issues” Because it most fits my own story of writing in prison, the worry that I’m not good enough, that my grammar and spelling is marginal, and that anything I write just would not be appealing to the readers. But as time moves on, I am finding my voice and it’s starting to feel great.*



The officer calls my name, “McCoy!”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Number?”

“R51451.”

“You got legal mail; sign here.” The officer pushes the envelope under the door. It’s a letter from the Public Defenders Office, from a lawyer I’ve been working with for the last 9 years. As I open the letter, my heart is pounding, and my palms are sweating because I have been waiting on this news since I talked with her a few weeks earlier. I begin to read the first line, “Dear Mr. McCoy, I’m glad to inform you that the judge has granted you a new trial and you would be transferred back to the county jail in the next 30 days.”

As the reality of the news hits me along with every emotion known to men, I sit down on my bed. I think about the last 20 years that I have spent fighting for this moment to happen. My kids! I have to call and give them the news, as they also have been waiting for me to come home after missing so many holidays, birthdays, and every other special day for the last 20 years. More emotions are coming because they have been let down so much over these 2 decades I have been gone. Maybe I should just wait to tell them.

I stand to my feet and walk to the blue steel door and yell through the small crack on the side of the door.

“What’s up, Spree?” he returns, then he repeats the same thing by yelling through the steel door.

“Man, homie it’s over. I’m going back to the county. I just got a letter from my mouth piece. She said the judge granted the new trial.”

When other people heard the news a big roar came over the wing in cheers. One person yelled out, “Man, Spree you finally got them people, you deserve it, homie.” Another voice yells, “Spree, leave me that radio big homie.”

I’m trying to hear what my cellie is saying over all the voices on the wing. He is trying to tell me something, but I can’t hear what he is saying. The voices are getting louder and louder as they drown out my voice. “Black!” “Spree, wake up they calling yard.”

What? Yard!? As I’m gathering my thoughts, I hear my cellie saying, “Spree, you going to the yard?”

“Spree you woke? They calling yard Cellie.”

Damn, I just had a wild dream. “Cellie, I’m going. What time they running it?” Damn, another dream!

In closing, this writing is the dream of so many incarcerated men and women in the United States who are trying to win an appeal due to harsh prison sentences that are handed down from judges. Also, the legislature that passes these laws keeps people in prison for decades at a time for reasons that are unjust. Laws like truth-in-sentencing or gun enhancement can carry more time than the actual crime itself. These are the reasons why people dream of being released from prison, because it is easier for a camel to walk through the eye of a needle than it is for an incarcerated person to win their freedom through an appeal in the court system in America!

By Carail “Ace” Weeks

You are cordially invited to read an impressive public display of affection between Shontae and Tony, two childhood sweethearts who are experiencing a bout of uncertainty fueled by rumors of infidelity the night before their wedding. One of Tony’s groomsmen, with only precious hours before the wedding, must search the massive resort to find the bride and try untangling the web of doubt that friends and family members from both sides secretly spun against them. After the groomsman helps find reconciliation between the bride and groom, he finds himself entangled in a difficult past friendship with the bride’s sister Keisha.

Heavy Florida rain poured down throughout the Key West resort as Tony and I searched for Shontae. I watched as Tony questioned every bridesmaid like a missing persons detective of her whereabouts to no avail. With every failure, the deranged look in his eyes grew. I found it highly suspicious that not even her sister, Keisha, had spoken to her since she had gone missing.

The hour was past midnight, and lightning ignited the sky as we knocked on almost every door in the east wing of the resort, causing an unintentional panic amongst invited guests. Tony was looking for the woman he loved without caring about the disruption he created in his pathway; I knew he wasn’t in the right state of mind. We needed to form a plan if we hoped to cover more ground.



I placed my hand on Tony's shoulder and spoke calmly. "We're gonna need to split up if we're gonna find her before dawn." He stood there with a blank look on his face, responding with grunts and head nods, but he clearly understood. I really wasn't sure if it was the right decision to leave Tony by himself in such a vulnerable mental state, but the search required we split up; it was just that simple.

I went back to Keisha's suite and knocked and knocked until her door nearly came off the hinges. When she finally answered, she had a look that said, "I must have lost my mind." As soon as she opened the door far enough, I stormed inside, demanding answers. I looked Keisha in her eyes, informing her that I needed to know where Shontae was if I had any hope of saving my friend's wedding. Keisha slyly deflected, answering my questions by asking questions of her own. "Well, Carail, does your woman know you are knocking on my door at this late hour?" "What would she think if she knew we were in this room alone?" I dismissed her questions outright. She knew full well of my wife's uneasiness around the close connection Keisha and I shared, but now wasn't the time to get into all of that with her. I needed answers and needed them quickly.

"I don't have time for games, Keisha. Tell me what I want to know, or I promise I'm gonna pick you up, carry you down to the beach, and throw your ass in the ocean!" I shouted to get her attention; I wasn't sure if she believed my threat or not, but she told me what I needed to know after I made her a promise to have a conversation with her later about the love she had for me, which had been prolonged far too long.

The sun was starting to rise as I rushed towards the north wing of the resort. I vaulted down the staircase to the massive wine cellar, screaming out Shontae's name. There was a silhouette shifting within the shadows, and a raspy voice responded as if its owner had been crying through the night. "Let me guess, my sister told you where to find me, huh? She always had a special love for you Carail. I never could understand why she allowed so much time to go by without telling you how she felt."

"Shontae, can we talk about that later? Right now, I'm here to be Tony's voice, to let you know how much he's in love with you, and to assure you that those rumors aren't true."

A low chuckle slipped out of her dry throat. "In love? If that's true, how could he play me like a fool?" Sensing her willingness to talk, I sat on a wine barrel and placed my hand on her shoulder to calm her, speaking sincerely just like I did with Tony earlier.

"Think about it for a minute Shontae, whomever shared those lies with you must have a hidden agenda or wanted to see the both of you unmarried. I've known you and Tony since we played hide and seek in that old treehouse our parents told us to stay away from as kids. When I wasn't around, you were always the one that gave him the opportunity to be vulnerable. When his father got drunk and beat him and his mother, you gave him the strength to endure. And when he went to prison for a couple years, you were the reason he changed to be the man he is today. I know you need a minute to process everything, but remember you only get one chance to find your soulmate in life. He'll be waiting for you at the altar in a few hours, so I hope you find the courage to ignore all this noise and listen to your heart."

When I opened the door to the room Tony and I shared, he looked defeated. He instantly asked, "Any luck?" with those puppy dog eyes he flashes when he's worried. I walked over to the closet and told him how I found her; to get dressed for the wedding. This was supposed to be Tony's happiest day of his life, but the uncertainty surrounding whether Shontae would show or not still made him nervous. Tony waited patiently with his hands inside his pockets, clutching the note that described his eternal love. The invited guests walked into the ballroom, many hours earlier than expected, most of their faces reflecting pictures of joy; there were some that were indifferent, that didn't seem too happy at all.

Everything was colorfully designed, the white and blue tables and chairs coordinated beautifully with the bridesmaids' dresses and stylish hair. The black and blue suits of the groomsmen resembled the intangible love between the two best friends. The pianist sat calmly waiting while tension filled the air. Instantly, the crowd's attention was drawn to the back of the room as the doors opened, and the bride was there in all her resplendent beauty. All eyes were on her as she walked down the aisle with her father on her arm as "My Love" by Jess Glynne floated through the air.

Shontae glided slowly toward Tony to a rhythm of love. When she reached the altar, her father placed her hand into Tony's. He clung to the note inside his pocket; afterwards he unfolded it and read slowly, "In this broken world you are the only thing that holds it together for me, Shontae. I vow to walk through life with you to reach beyond the finish line of our journey; if there's a day you feel the finish line is too far, I'll carry you the rest of the way. I vow to love you forever and always."

Shontae, in response began her own vows, "When you feel cold in the night, I'll always be there to keep you warm. You have always put color in my life." She turned to face her audience and said, "my love for you will never change. I'll love you always." As they kissed to seal their vows, I glanced over to my own true love sitting in the pews. She was as beautiful as a blossoming rose on a spring morning.

Then Keisha walked up, interrupting my lovely view and asked, "Are you ready to fulfill your promise?"

To Be Continued... Until the next event!



**By Luigi Adamo**

I have a weird affinity for antiheroes. There's something about the way they handle situations wrong for all the right reasons that just resonates with me. This is probably why I'm such a huge Godzilla fan: he is the quintessential antihero. That lizard is renowned the world over for smashing cities to dust and sending throngs of terror-stricken Japanese screaming through the streets of Tokyo. But when some other monster arises and Godzilla faces off against it, something magical happens. All of that dread and fear that Godzilla normally causes the audience is transformed into giddy excitement, filling the pits of our stomachs with Mothra-sized butterflies of anticipation. This is because we already know how badass Godzilla is, so when he takes on some new monster we cheer, because we know this new monster is about to "get it," well, at least I know I do.

My father is also such a character. Far from Godzilla's stature, Dad stands only five foot six but has the presence of a titan. One stern look from that man could make King Kong get down off that building, put down the blonde, and behave himself, yet alone an unruly child. I wouldn't say that Dad was an unreasonably strict disciplinarian, but when he was angry his wrath was more devastating than Godzilla's radioactive fire ever was. My mother, brother, sister, and I lived in mortal terror that we would do something to incur his wrath, but at the same time we had no fear of any outside threat. To this day Dad is the only person I've ever been afraid of, and I've been incarcerated for almost twenty years.

In the spring of my senior year of high school, Dad bought me my first car. It was a 99 Mercury Cougar, with the sports package, and grey leather interior. It was silver with chrome highlights and looked like Mecha-Godzilla from the front. It was too small, not particularly fast, and turned out to be a lemon, but it was cool looking so for the first few thousand miles I really loved that car.

We were living in the woods of Wayne, a subdivision on the outskirts of the very small horse-centric village of Wayne, some sixty miles west of Chicago. Way out in the boonies for sure, everything was at least a ten-minute drive away, but this was back in the late nineties when gas was cheap so we didn't mind.

My favorite past time was driving around listening to CDs (remember those) and smoking cigarettes (which were also way cheaper back then. I could top off my tank and buy a pack of Marlboros with a twenty, and get folding change!) On this particular day, my younger brother Tony and his friend Rich had some sort of after school activity at their middle school, and because the school was a good thirty-

minute drive from home, mom asked if I could pick the boys up and drop Rich off at his house while she finished making dinner.

Of course I didn't mind; the drive to the school was pleasant enough, scenic with little traffic. Besides, this was before I'd dare to openly smoke in front of my parents, and I was aching for a cigarette. I got to the school and picked the boys up without incident, but on the way to drop Rich off, something very peculiar happened.

Rich also lived in Wayne, but in the village center, and as I said before, Wayne is very horse-centric, with the majority of its residents being avid equestrians. The Wayne riding club is all-powerful there. I'm not kidding, according to the latest census, there are still more horses than people in Wayne.

There I was in Wayne's village center stopped at a T intersection waiting to turn right onto Rich's street. As I looked left to check for oncoming traffic I saw this huge white riderless horse charging down the street with reckless abandon. It must have escaped from a nearby stable, and had decided to run amok through the village. It was coming right towards me. I locked eyes with the beast, and I know in that moment that it was my shiny silver car it was after.

Despite living in Wayne, I'm a city boy and have absolutely no experience with horses, but I'm not an idiot and could tell that this animal was crazed. It wasn't more than fifty feet from me, and was closing fast. The thought of explaining hoof-shaped dents on the hand and roof of my brand new car to my very dubious father was not at all appealing. So I did what any rational teenager would do; I smashed my foot down on the accelerator and made a sharp right, speeding past Rich's house, leaving the horse in the dust.

I drove in a big circle, thinking that the horse would be gone by the time we came back around. As we came back to that same intersection, I carefully craned my neck to check for rampaging horses. There were none, so I dropped Rich off, thinking that was the end of my little adventure.

I began to realize how wrong that presumption was, taken I noticed that a middle-aged man had blocked my exit from Rich's driveway with a green John Deere riding lawn mower. I put my car back in park as he walked up to my driver's side window. I remember saying something like, "Hi" or "What's up?" when he reached into my car and snatched my keys right out of the ignition. I was so surprised by this incomprehensible development that I just froze. The man then berated me for not stopping to help when I saw a horse on the loose, and if I realized how dangerous those horses are. I tried explaining that I knew nothing of horses, and had two middle-schoolers with me to boot, but that only enraged him further and he started smacking and slapping



(By Luigi Adamo, cont...)

me through the car's window.

The assault ended just about as abruptly as it began, and the man tossed my keys into the street, then got back on his mower and rode away before I had a chance to strike back. My brother and I sat there in Rich's driveway for what seemed like ten minutes, (but was probably only a few seconds) stunned, not comprehending what just happened.

Eventually I collected my wits and my keys and drove home. I was so upset about what happened that I couldn't even speak. As we drove in silence, I ruminated on the shame and humiliation I had just suffered, and how I did nothing to deserve any of it. Dinner was already on the table when we walked through the door, mom and dad were sitting down, about to eat when Tony just exploded the entire chain of events in a maelstrom of words. They sat there captivated, listening to my brother's excited recount of the day's strange events, laughing at the part with the horse, but they both grew serious when he explained what that man did.

By the time Tony finished dad was on his feet. He was smoldering as he asked, "Lou, is this true?" I nodded, but couldn't meet his eyes. I explained that the man surprised me and how ashamed I was for not defending myself and for letting him slap me like that.

Dad put his hand on my shoulder and forced my chin up with his knuckle, making me look at him. He was grinning that familiar rage-filled grimace and he said, "No son, you did the right thing. He's a grown man and you're just a kid." My lip quivered but dad's eyes narrowed. "OK, that's it!" he announced, slapping a nearby counter top, "You and me are gonna go back there right now, lets see if this tough guy wants to try slapping me around." And off we went, leaving our dinner for later.

Throughout that short drive, I had those same Mothra butterflies I got whenever Godzilla would show up, and why not? I knew this guy was about to "get it" worse than any of those monsters did, and I couldn't wait.

We soon arrived at Rich's house, where nearby that same man was still riding his John Deere. Dad got out of the car and walked right up to him. As an antihero character Dad did not disappoint.

That man understood two things after his encounter with my father: 1) there are worse things to meet than loose horses and 2) how humiliating it is to be slapped around.

I couldn't tell you if Dad handled this situation well or badly, but I sure was proud of him.

Autoethnography by Alexis "The Fox" Santana

Crafting a writer's life is difficult enough. It's frustrating, time consuming, emotionally taxing, and often yields little reward. So, why did I choose to craft a writer's life in prison: a place that's demeaning enough? It's simple: I want to be the master craftsman of my own life, the author of my own story, to control my own narrative in a place where control is stripped away from us. To control our own narratives, we must consider studying the following techniques: motivation/inspiration, humanness, self-advocacy, reading, reading like a writer, and presentation literacy, because with these tools people can begin to cultivate narrative control.

I define narrative control as the ability to express oneself accurately. The fact that Spanish is my first language definitely made expressing myself challenging to the point where I never pictured myself crafting a writer's life when I was free, let alone while being confined. It wasn't until I received an unexpected letter from a friend that I became motivated to put some ink on paper. I wanted to paint a mental picture for her, to express my understanding of the world as accurately and creatively as possible, but I lacked the practice. I wrote draft, after draft, after draft, until three days later I finally managed to craft some semblance of a letter.

Tomas B. Whitaker wrote in his article "The Price of Remaining Human," "If you don't have a fire inside you raging to be released, you are never going to make it in this game (168). The game Whitaker is referring to is writing. Thanks to my friend, I realized my raging inspiration derived from my need to accurately convey what I wanted to express. Your motivation/inspiration may be different than mine, but it is equally important to have when wanting to control our narratives.

Humanness is also an important quality writing should have. Often times I assumed that good writing meant academic jargon and skillful usage of pretentious words. This isn't true; what makes writing, plots, dialogue, and characters come to life is the complexity of being human. Taking control of our narrative is being able to display our blemishes as much as our excellence. Take Anne Lamott, for example, in her book *Bird by Bird*, she writes, "I had a few hundred more drinks with them, and the merest bit of cocaine. I actually began to resemble an anteater at one point" (84). Lamott's book is an instruction guide on writing. Her personal stories crafted within her teachings sequestered my attention, but most importantly, they connected with me on a personal level; yes, because I used to snort lines as well.



(By Alexis Santana, cont...)

It's bad enough that prison censors our uniqueness. We should avoid censoring our own voices, unintentionally or intentionally. When writing we tend to write in a voice we think others want to hear. I'm no exemption. I often confuse cultivating my voice with abandoning it. The difference is that when we cultivate our voices, our words compliment our thoughts and ideas, but when we abandon our voice, our words overshadow our thoughts and ideas. This is why self-advocacy is an important tool to develop. It is our originality that gives us strength.

Just as I mentioned earlier, I was inspired to begin writing by my pen-friend, but I discovered a deeper need to express myself accurately. Inspiration comes in many forms and from many sources. One of the many sources that fuels my aspiring writer's life is reading. I found that reading promotes curiosity and creativity. Recently, I've been reading *Red Rising* by Pierce Brown. I found myself unable to peel away from the Science Fiction dystopian future Brown crafted. Between the covers of this book exists a world where humanity has evolved into giants with incredible physical strength and advanced capacity to learn. The human race, billions of years into the future, has terraformed other planets in our solar system, but no matter how advanced society becomes, hierarchy and rule still exist. I followed Darrow (the main character) as he climbed the ranks of society on a mission to liberate his people from the shackles that enslaved them. Darrow was born a red (the purest of society) by being curved (a process that involved genetic and physical reengineering of his body and mind).

Every writer has a book that has inspired them to write or emulate. Brown has provoked my curiosity and creativity in some ways. Brown uses historical figures in his fictitious novel to create a more believable story. He draws from figures like Cicero, Caesar, Plato, and from his own knowledge as a political scientist to make this dystopian world come to life. Brown also writes vivid detail of his characters' surroundings which has made me realize how important it is to describe surroundings within a story. When seeking to control our narrative, we must fuel our creativity through reading.

Just because we read leisurely to inspire creativity doesn't mean we can't read the same material in a different form. Reading like a writer is another important technique to adopt. When we read like writers, we identify the choices an author makes in their writing so that we can better understand our own. The idea is to examine whatever you are reading, looking at writing techniques, and then deciding if you want to adapt these same techniques. Mike Bum explains this better in his essay "How to Read Like a Writer" by explaining a move author Bishop makes

"from simply reporting her personal reaction to the things she read to attempt to uncover how the author led her (and other readers) to have those reactions. This effort to uncover how authors build texts is what makes reading like a writer so useful to student writers (73). In Lamott's book *Bird by Bird*, she writes, "I began to resemble an anteater at one point" (84). In one of my previous writings in class I wrote, "at the same point he began to resemble a praying mantis waiting for its food." By reading like a writer, I understood the power of similes. Lamott's technique painted a vivid image in my mind and I wanted to recreate for others through my own writing.

Sometimes as writers we suffer from rant-o-maniac syndrome. When seeking to control our narrative, more does not always equal better; it's clarity that equates to better writing. An antidote for this syndrome is presentation literacy. Presentation literacy is the ability to write and present an idea to a wide audience: it's commonly used for public speaking and it's a skill Chris Anderson teaches in his book *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking*. No matter in writing or speaking, holding people's attention is a difficult task, and ranting does not make it better. That is why Anderson introduces throughlining as a way to enhance presentation literacy. If your writing is not helping your main idea, cut it out of your paper. For example, my throughline for this essay has been narrative control which is the ability to express ourselves accurately. All other elements link back to how we can achieve better narrative control.

In conclusion, although these techniques are not set in stone and other individuals might have different techniques that help them control their narrative, it is definitely worth considering studying the following: inspiration/motivation, humanness, self-advocacy, reading, reading like a writer, and presentation literacy.

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## Work Is Its Own Cure! By **Anthony “T.D.” Smith**

As a first time student in a prestigious university that sponsors a bachelor’s degree program in prisons, I was amazed at how personal college courses or degree programs can be. I had no knowledge of how the curriculums of classes are formed, nor the contents of their topics. You see, I dropped out of high school before the 11th grade, and obtained my G.E.D later on in prison. I’ve even tried some vocational and academic college courses along the way. Never had I heard anything about students’ past familial and personal history being involved in the curriculum. I’m not sure how knowing the intimate details of a student’s upbringing qualifies for a grade. How does having both, either, or no parents in the home equate to passing or failing? I wasn’t going to dwell on this too much, but after completing three other class assignments (Statement of Purpose, Identity, and Genealogy papers) that required deeply-rooted personal history, I was asked to revisit my journals for another assignment. I noticed a recurring theme within them all, where I mentioned my discomfort with being so open, so soon. One of the journals resonated more because it involved me asking another student personal questions, which was an ethnography assignment. The evidence of being uncomfortable was noted, but that didn’t appease me.

Even though he knew why I had to ask so many intrusive questions, I still felt as if I were trespassing on his personal space. I could see that he wasn’t comfortable either, by the way he sweated. So we both had to find ways to ease each other’s minds. We did that by questioning the need for our history to be involved in classroom work. We both agreed, in some parts, that it was for identifying who the university was allowing in their program, and we let that be and moved on.

As I got past the first couple of questions leading to deeper ones, our comfortability with one another seemed to settle in, because he talked and basically answered the questions I needed without me asking. Reading his mood and body language, it was as if a faucet had been turned on. Just as his words were flowing, so were his raw emotions and vulnerability, something men don’t reveal to other men in this environment. To see him and hear him speak so candidly empowered me to open up when my turn came, but not all are like me in here.

Being open and vulnerable might work in a transitory university setting, but our environmental atmosphere changes as the wind blows through the seasons. Some of the people we’re open and vulnerable with today could be our enemy tomorrow. Having shared the knowledge of some of the traumatic times in our lives could be weaponized against us. It’s not too far fetched to think along these lines because we are in prison.

I chose this topic so others will know that they are not alone in these feelings and thoughts. As they do, I know and feel the sense of intrusion and push against the barriers that I placed around my emotional issues, as well as the mental and emotional strength it takes to keep those barriers in place. Constantly being asked to reconstruct those barriers in order to place a door is even harder, the door being a metaphor to express the open and close process used to access our past, for the repeated request to experience our history and relive specific moments.

With that being said, I’ve truthfully asked myself, “Has this method of pedagogy helped me more than others?” The answer is a resounding, “Yes.” By asking all those personal questions and having me revisit some uncomfortable moments from my past, two things happened: one, I learned a formal term for some of the events I had from past experiences, which is trauma; two, I was forced to confront and deal with my past traumas as an adult. Doing that, I was able to come to terms with a lot of my unresolved issues I’ve been carrying around. The repetitive writing, the constant reflections of my past and present, along with the willingness to forgive allowed me to heal in areas I had forgotten about.

I can’t pretend my healing is easy because it wasn’t; I’m still processing. So far, my mind is clearer, my heart is lighter, and my spirit continues to soar. If this is the cure, I’ve put in all this emotional work for...I’m all in!

## “Completing the Process” by **Jason Carter**

Continued education is a necessary component of a complete rehabilitation. Rehab should go further than treating addiction. Rehab can be a life rehabilitation, especially recently, with prisons across America offering inmates the opportunity of receiving their high school diplomas, G.E.Ds, skilled trades, and college-level degrees through renowned institutions and organizations. With the aid of these learning opportunities, people will be in a better position to get in the workforce upon their release, building a new life for themselves and their families, resulting in decreased recidivism by giving people an alternative from the life they had formally known.

My decision to rehabilitate my life with the aid of continued education was ingrained in me at a young age; while I was going through middle school and high school, my dad was studying his way through grad school. I got to witness the results of continued education by watching my father break through glass ceilings and climb up the corporate ladder.



Even with my father's positive influence, I still managed to get myself into serious legal trouble. My arrest was my wake up call. Even though I was over forty years old, I knew it wasn't too late to rehabilitate my life and start introducing things in my life that would pay dividends in my future. When I got bailed out a month after my arrest, I went to a halfway house because of my eviction I was served during my short time in county. There were strict rules, including a Christian-based curriculum that helped me reconnect with God. The study program required a lot of reading and writing assignments. By the time I completed their program, I gained the confidence to take up a full-time schedule at the local community college. It was there that I got it in my head I could be a writer.

I graduated two years later with my associate's degree in the month of May. Then, finally, my trial began the following November. I lost my trial, and when I was sentenced, I thought any chance of continuing my education went out the window. Luckily, I was wrong; on top of that, I wasn't alone. I found myself surrounded by others who wanted a change, the chance to rehabilitate their lives through higher education.

The prison I was sent to offers a bachelor's degree program through Lewis University. I got accepted into the second cohort and the freshman writing class exposed me to other inmate's stories of personal achievements and succeeding in ways they didn't think were possible; in a short story written by Alexis J. Santana titled, "Choices," Santana writes about overcoming his literary challenges while he was in jail, in time to join the first cohort of the same program I was accepted to with that degree he also hopes to then, upon his release, improve his chances of getting a job that will allow a better life for him and his family.

My experience in prison also involves a continuous legal battle for my freedom through writing to my appeals attorney. I read about another inmate that did something similar; Alejo Rodriguez wrote a short story titled, "And Still I Write: Creative Expression for Self Advocacy," where after years of appearances and writing to the parole board and receiving denials, Rodriguez joined a writing workshop at his Eastern New York prison and sharpened his style writing that helped him cultivate his voice and was one of the contributing factors of him finally getting paroled.

Part of my writing prompt in our assignments for our writing class was related to crafting a writer's life in prison. Through my research about inmate authors improving themselves and their writing skills through workshops, programs, or continued educations, I came to understand that getting published doesn't guarantee a New York Times Best Seller, just like earning a degree or certificate won't guarantee a person a job. I still believe I will be in a much better position upon my release to get a job that can pay enough for me to be financially stable, than if I didn't pursue continued education.

I did appreciate the contrarian point of view presented by Thomas Bartlett Whitaker titled, "The Price of Remaining Human," where he explains how writing a book about your experiences in prison will not pave the way to riches, "neither will you find fame," (pp. 169). I also appreciate his advice on why you should write about your experiences; "your need to report upon the unnecessary cruelty of the prison world..." (pp. 169).

My motivations and goals not only involve me getting out of jail, but also getting my story out to the world. I would like my writings to evolve into a book or a series of books. I would share my experiences of how, through continued education, I was able to fine tune my writing skills to better cultivate my own voice towards self-advocacy, earn my bachelor's degree to improve my chances of getting a decent paying job, and initiate a new goal of creating a successful career as a published author.

In my opinion, stopping abuse or addiction are only steps in the rehabilitation process. Complete rehabilitation involves training a person a new way to live their lives. A quote from an article discussing this same topic by Leanne Childs called, "Resilient Dwelling vs. Homemaking: Where Shelledy went Wrong," reinforces my point, "the growing belief that higher education within prison, specifically writing instruction, aids in rehabilitation." (pp. 24)

Continued education offers an intangible. That intangible is hope, hope that any inmate can realize it's never too late to pursue their dreams, or to record those dreams and have them published. Continued education also has a "trickle down" effect to the people who may believe their story doesn't matter, but everybody's story matters.

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Dear Readers and Listeners,

What we have here today is a young man named **Kenneth Nelson** who goes by the name **Twin**. Today you will hear my struggles and my accomplishments on how education helped build my writing life in prison. I've applied myself to get my bachelor's degree in professional studies and a minor in business administration.

After I left Pickneyville Correctional Center, I was transferred to Dixon Correctional Center, where I stayed 4 ½ years. One day while watching the institutional TV channel, I saw that they were recruiting prisoners for a bachelor's through Lewis University and you had to be approved for a Pell grant to get accepted. It also stated that prisoners with (5-10) years left on their sentences were a priority. By me going through that before with my G.E.D., I applied myself with a little over 13 years left on my sentence and got accepted.

Without me attaining my G.E.D. I knew I wouldn't get accepted for (1) you needed a high school diploma or a G.E.D., and also need to have a score of a 8.0 to get in. Not only that, you needed to write an essay to get in as well. I was not always capable of meeting this demand...

Education is the key to success is what my grandmother used to always tell me. Looking back I wish I would've listened to her. Being incarcerated with an 8th grade diploma is something I couldn't stand for, but the reality of the situation is, that's what it was. That was something I couldn't live with. Education is fundamental, absolutely necessary for building a writer's life in prison! Being sentenced to 33 years without a high school diploma or G.E.D. was detrimental to me. I didn't know or understand the law. I made a vow to myself that I will advance my education as far as I was capable of. I was enrolled in G.E.D. in Stateville Correctional Center with a 6th grade reading level. How do I know, because I took the TABE test in Stateville Correctional Center and I scored a 6.3 in reading. I was really ashamed of my score. So I didn't share it with anyone. One day without prior notice in 2016, I was transferred from Stateville Correctional Center to Pickneyville Correctional Center in Southern Illinois. The bus finally arrived at Pickneyville Correctional Center, after a long six hours! Boy was I tired! I stepped off the bus and went straight to healthcare. After healthcare I was led to my cell. I stayed in receiving for the weekend, and Monday morning I was sent to (GP) General Population.

Monday night I dropped a request slip to the (EFA) Education Facility Administrator in Pickneyville, and it read as follows. "I would love to advance my education, I'm in the \_\_\_ Pathways system and I would love to finish my G.E.D." They wrote me back and said you will be enrolled in the next ABE class.

I wrote back and said, I was already in G.E.D. class in Stateville. Why do I have to start over? They sent me a letter back stating I was never supposed to be in the G.E.D. class. They said my TABE score was too low, and they would make sure I take the proper steps so I can attain my G.E.D. the right way. So I can gain the knowledge I need in order for me to pass the G.E.D. test.

I was sitting in my cell in despair, telling myself, not again. According to the Illinois Department of Corrections (I.D.O.C.), prisoners who have outdates before yours get first dibs to schooling before prisoners with longer terms. All I'm thinking was I will never get in school now with 21 years and six months left. So I kept writing request slips begging to get in school.

Well, what do you know, I was given a call pass early in the morning 2 months later, stating I would be starting school at 8:00 am. Thank God I was so thrilled to get in school. So my journey begins. My ABE teacher name was Mrs. Caldwell and she took no prisoners. When I say she meant business, she meant business. She didn't play when it came to learning. She knew what she produced would get us to the next level. As I listened and learned, I became real good at basic math and reading. I was so good a few months later I made it to the GED class. During my tenure in GED, I was able to get a job as a personal property specialist in Pickneyville Correctional Center. My job consisted of doing a lot of paperwork. As I learned in GED about writing, I applied to my job.

I became very good at doing the transfers paperwork that was coming in and out of the prison. Without being educated about the writing lessons on the computer in GED class, I knew I wouldn't be as good as I was at my job without it. My GED teacher only taught basic Math. So, I had to educate myself by reading Kaplan's GED book in order to advance my Mathematics.

Not only does a writer need an education, they also need to have educated people around them to support their writing life in prison. They can't be in solitude. I say that to say being in solitude can affect a person mentally and have them bottle up their emotions. In the Writing Center Journal article by Jamal Bakr, he talked about "collaborative learning from the perception of a prisoner, and how he experienced long term segregation." Collaborative learning can help bring those aw emotions out in a learning atmosphere to the point where they're alive again, and thriving for the best like they were never alone (Bakr pg. 129-130).



Writing is a form of liberation, through education in being in prison. The first thing you should do in prison is seek an education about the ins and outs of prison. Most of us in prison have to us and build our writing skills. Everything we do is through writing. We have to write grievances and requests for any pass such as for healthcare, commissary, law library, etc.

Most of us in prison can't afford legal fees or lawyers. So, we have to learn and write and fight our way back to freedom on our own, and without knowing how to write, we wouldn't know how to file appeals or briefs. Also, we may need to write lawsuits against any humane problems. I'm excited they're bringing back higher education in prison. Prison holds some of the most creative, smart, and intelligent human beings. The only way to express their creativity is through writing letters to their families or some time of vendor willing to put out their work. To build a writer's life in prison we must continue this thing called collaborative learning. When we build our writing life together, we come up with more ideas and different ways to express our writing so the world would start hearing and be able to listen to our pain through writing.

*Dear Readers and Listeners, Thank you for your patience. As this essay slows down and comes to an end, I want you to consider what you just read and tell me where I can grow, and also your true feeling as you read and experienced my struggles and accomplishments. I would like to ask for your honest feedback. Again, Thank you!! Kenneth "Twin" Nelson*

## Are you Doing Time or Is Time Doing You? by **Charles W. King**

Armed with everything I did not know about the law, I showed up every court date for 3 years, dueling against my appointed public pretend defender who had one objective: to railroad my entire case (better known as to make sure I was found guilty). Whether I was innocent or not, the states attorney changed the discovery in my case like she changed her panties. I had judge who knew I was innocent, but did not consider justice a thing of significant importance. With all three working together, I had little hope of what's considered a fair and impartial trial. It's been 23 years since my conviction took place.

Being given a 40 year sentence at 85% at age 40 would cause many to lose hope and faith in a system one had trusted for years. Now, I am living in a world where steel bars and concrete blocks are your front door, where the smell of your cellmate's feet, or the outrageous foul odor of a "fart" literally wakes you from sleep, and where c/o's enjoy the humiliation of what's called a strip search.

A strip search includes the removal of all clothing as a male officer commands you to bend over completely naked and spread your butt cheeks. These demeaning acts comes with the culture and they are only a small portion of the mindset one must consider when doing time. The things listed above are defining ingredients which one doing time must consider whether in the negative or the positive, these actions decide for you a non-negotiable fact.

Are you doing time or is time doing you? You don't get the choice to decide if you want the actions listed above. They come with the culture, some people cope with them by staying high on psychotropic drugs, others make up lies and excuses to certain authority figures to obtain what's called "single person cell privileged" This helps eliminate having "time do you" and how to deal with it. "Having time do you" means you succumb to the drama of prison life by letting the actions of staff, God, and inmates alike control your actions, decisions, thoughts, attitudes, and ways.

"You doing time means you do not succumb to the drama of prison life by not letting the actions of staff and inmates alike control your actions, thoughts, decision, attitude, and ways. It's 6:45 in the A.M as keys form a jangling sound, and a large steel door bounces off its frame as if it was let go to slam intentionally. The light switch of reality reminds you that another day has dawned in prison. The most hopeful excitement happens Monday through Friday where the entire infrastructure of prison life is abuzz with the day to day events like school, commissary, gym, assignments, people going home, etc. It is in these moments that the reality of each day brings on the anticipation each individual will shape and form his decisions on. It is where and when the decisions of how to handle time one is facing are judged and considered. The question will present itself to all, but not all will take the question into consideration. Am I doing time or is time doing me? One can be totally oblivious and human to the profound effect and consequences of doing time without purpose or meaning.

"When you do time"

When you do time you understand that you are part of a culture, and that psychotropic drugs, lies, authority figures, single cells, c/o's and other inmates are a part of the culture you are in, so instead of running from, or trying to escape the reality of the situation or get high, handle it, or lie to whisk it away, you embrace it, not



conforming to it. You do not let it dictate your pace or control your mind in any aspect. You see it for what it is: a culture, you are not worrying about it, but rising above it. In humility to self you don't let the situation define you because you are defined by the positive good you carry in your heart and mind, the good actions you put into motion as you do time.

### “When Time Does You”

When time does you, you also understand that you are a part of a culture, and that psychotropic drugs, lies, authority figure, single cells, c/o's and other inmates are part of the culture you are in. “Only used negatively,” you run hastily from the reality of the situation by getting high in every conceivable way, or lying to try to control the scenario or arguing and fighting with c/o's. You fail to embrace it. You conform to it because you let the negative situation dictate how you respond. The negative culture controls your mind causing you to act out and take part in negative actions that define you as a drug user, liar, with no self control, quick to anger with no self discipline letting your heart and mind be filled with negative actions that you put in motion as times does you.

As your own self empowerment takes thoughts consider all that has been spoken and objectively ask yourself. Am I doing time or is time doing me? Of course we all have had an encounter with any one of them who is letting time do them. Even though they are free they are locked up in anger, hate, pride, selfishness, envy, alcohol, etc. Yes, time is doing them. But if we govern ourselves by the standard of being true to self, being spiritually free, mentally free yet physically confined, then the physical will without doubt catch up to the spiritual and mental and in turn one will no longer be subject to letting time do you. Instead, you will find peace and be in control when you complete doing time. -Charles W. King.

### By **Joe Stock**: Why Is it Important to Craft a Writer's Life in Prison?

“Why is it important to craft a writer's life in prison?” There are many answers to that question. I will comment on some of them and focus on a few. From both the prisoner and the non-prisoner alike, the most common answers given are to communicate with your loved ones, to seek out legal help, and to occupy your time. These are valid and important reasons, reasons that mean more to a prisoner than one might think.

Now that smartphones are the norm in the free world, people have the ability to stay in continuous, even constant, contact with each other. This is a luxury that prisoners do not have. Yes, some prisoners own tablets. But due to the security screening process, the incoming and outgoing emails to and from those tablets are not instant. So when a prisoner writes a letter (or an email) to a loved one, they need to make it count. It should be clear. It should be personable. And, most importantly, it should be memorable.

These same standards should be applied when a prisoner writes to a public defender, an attorney, or an innocence project. You need to be able to convey who you are, what you are going through, and what kind of help you are seeking from them. When your freedom is on the line, you cannot afford to waste anyone's time, including your own. If your request for help is denied or it goes unanswered, a poorly written letter will not be the reason why. Knowing this, at the very least, should give you some peace of mind.

Writing to occupy your time can be an effective way to further obtain some form of peace of mind, which is worth its weight in gold in a place like prison. So, what should a prisoner write about? Journaling might be a good way to find out. Using a pen to put your thoughts and feelings on paper is something that every prisoner should consider doing from time to time, if not every day. When given a choice between a pen or a weapon, the pen is always the better choice. Besides, what you write with that pen can become your greatest weapon of all: your words.

Words are powerful! The right words can bring truth to light. They can bring much needed attention to a person's plight. And they can make the world see you as the person that you are. With this in mind, it is no wonder that we have all been told, “Choose your words wisely.”

An undeniable part of being a prisoner is that of suffering. It not only comes with the territory, it is a huge part of what the territory itself consists of. In his book, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Thich Nhat Hanh explains that suffering is necessary for growth and that we need to fully understand our suffering in order to transform it into something positive. For a prisoner, writing can be the mechanism used to reach that understanding and lead to that transformation. This is important for a number of reasons. The most obvious one being that if you do nothing more than endure suffering without trying to understand why you are experiencing it, you will simply continue to suffer. Understanding the causes of suffering can help you to deal with it better and to learn from it. Both of which are necessary components for transforming it into something positive. After reading Nhat Hanh's book and then contemplating on the importance of crafting a writer's life in prison, I realized that it is, in fact, possible to transform suffering (negativity) into something positive (literary works).

While I am on the topic of suffering I should mention a man by the name of Viktor E. Frankl. He was an Austrian Jew who survived being held prisoner in a Nazi camp during World War II. Even while imprisoned, Frankl's



perspective on suffering was that we should find meaning in our suffering, then use what we find as motivation to look beyond our suffering and towards our potential future.

When Frankl first arrived at the concentration camp, he was forced to part with almost everything he was wearing or had on his person. This included his manuscript. Undeterred, Frankl took it upon himself to start writing notes on scraps of paper and hiding them. Little by little, he continued the long, tedious and dangerous process of rewriting his manuscript while still in captivity. Had he been caught doing this, the Nazis would have almost certainly killed him. So why did he risk his life to rewrite the manuscript? Because it helped him to preserve his humanity! I do not think it is a coincidence that Frankl just so happened to utilize writing as one of his survival skills, as well as one of his coping skills. At the very least, writing gave his life purpose. Which I would argue stresses the importance of crafting a writer's life in prison!

Upon learning of what he endured, most would agree that, seemingly, Frankl was in a hopeless situation. Even so, he knew it was imperative that he preserve his humanity. As do I. Being that I am a wrongfully convicted prisoner who has been sentenced to a de facto life sentence, I know all too well the dehumanization that begins the second that the handcuffs tighten and lock around your wrists for the first of what will be many times. Your birth name becomes nothing more than a formality in the eyes of the state and of society. You are a number now, like a piece of property. State property.

Writing can be a crucial method for taking back your humanity, maintaining it, and preserving it. It can be what changes peoples negative perceptions of you. Writing can make the world see that even though you are caged like an animal, you are still an actual human being! Could there be a more important reason to craft a writer's life in prison?!

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# *Sheridan C.C. Barber College*

FREEDOM NO LONGER THE COST by CRL  
WITH THE FLICK OF MY WRIST I'M MY OWN BOSS...  
NO MORE DRUGS OR GETTING TOSSED...  
A TALENT THAT WILL PROVIDE ME WITH THE MEANS TO FLOSS...  
WITH MY FREEDOM NO LONGER BEING THE COST...  
THE THOUGHT ON LIFE HAS CHANGED  
NO MORE WRONGFUL THINGS FOR A LIL CHANGE...  
SHEARS AND SCISSORS IN MY HAND, LIFE WAS NEVER THE SAME.



## The Beauty of Being a Barber

As an inspiring Barber, I've really gotten to understand the value of personal care and the investment of your best qualities into others.

What comes to my mind is the light that brightens the eyes of so many satisfied customers. It builds confidence for the Barber and the client. It is an invaluable transaction of trust and mutual interest, which is used as a motivation of community and stimulation of positive energy, generating a light of confidence and assurance. It is an amazing experience, especially if you are on the giving end of the transaction. Just being able to witness the light grow steadily as the customer looks upon the art and recognizes him or herself as a part of the masterpiece.

So, I am becoming more aware of the beauty of being a Barber. And I am thankful for the chance to share my gift with others. Thank you. Yours Truly, Deon Reece  
Teacher: Mrs. Werner

## Barbering by Dewan Gaston

ARTISTRY, A way for you to be creative in your own way.

What made me want to become a barber over the years? I learned how to cut my own hair. I made a lot of mistakes, and I learned from them. Then I realized I grew a passion for it. I used to always ask myself what I could see myself doing in the future. Once I heard how much money barbers were making I said, "Yep, I'm about to sign up for barber school." I was accepted. I want to give my instructor Ms. Werner a special thanks for giving me opportunity and teaching me how to become a professional barber and a barbershop owner. I'm learning so much about barbering that I had no idea you had to learn to become a licensed barber. For anyone who has a little experience with cutting hair or can see themselves being a barber, go sign up for barber school now! The field is open. My goal is to become a licensed barber and open up a barber shop in the future. Barbering helped me with other aspects of my life like social skills, being responsible for myself and others, and being a productive person when I'm released.

## By Robert Murbach, Sheridan CC Barber School

In April of 2024 I started Barber School vocational classes while currently serving a 7 year sentence at Sheridan C.C. on my sixth incarceration in IDOC. I have spent most of my life in and out of the system and therefore have missed many years of quality time with my children. Despite my trials and tribulations, I have managed to stay in contact and have a close relationship with my son Trey. Unfortunately, the relationship with my daughter, Harmony, has suffered, and as a result I have not spoken with her in over two years. At 22 years old, she blessed me with my first grandson this past December. She also graduated with honors from Educators of Beauty this year.

My plan is to use this opportunity in Barber School to get my professional barber's license and open up a shop for myself and my daughter as a family business. My hope is that one day this business can be passed down to my grandson as well. I am very happy to have the opportunity to learn this trade while incarcerated. I am really planning on this idea to be a lucrative business for myself and my family, but also as a way to bring my daughter and grandson back into my life. My goal is to be a much better grandpa than I was a dad. I'm grateful for this opportunity to change careers, another chance at life, and a much better family life than ever before.



# Stateville C.C. Barber College

Interview of Randy Royer, Conducted by Sherron "Sosa" Dillon

Sosa: Congrats on earning your Barber's license!



Randy: Thanks brother. It was a long time coming (Laughs).

Sosa: What made you decide to enroll into Stateville Barber College?

Randy: Actually, I didn't decide. Prior to my enrollment, I was in the GED class here and had plans on being a Teacher's Aid in the GED class. After I earned my GED, the EFA Ms. Sessler took it upon herself to enroll me and everyone else who earned their GED into Barber College.

Sosa: What were your initial feelings about that?

Randy: Well...initially I wasn't sure if I wanted to be in the Barber College. I mean, I had never cut hair before and it was quite intimidating to say the least.

Sosa: So what changed your mind?

Randy: As it turns out, I had gotten hired as a Teacher's Aid about a month or so after my enrollment in Barber College. By this time, I was beginning to get into the flow of things and wasn't sure what I should do, so I went to my then instructor Bobby Matteson and told him the situation.

Sosa: What was Bobby's response?

Randy: He asked me what I wanted to do and said it was my choice. It was one or the other, as both were full-time gigs. I told him I wasn't sure and after he took a moment to think, he asked me why I wanted to be a Teacher's Aid. At that time in my life, I was searching for purpose. I had no direction at all. I was 12 years into a 60 year sentence, and I didn't want to waste what life I did have doing "the prison thing," you know, sitting around, watching TV, going to yard, or going to commissary. I needed something more in my life, so I felt if I could help other guys in my same situation earn their GED, maybe I could find some purpose in that. After I told Bobby this, he gave me a nod and told me that if I really wanted to impact people in a positive way, becoming a barber is the perfect way to do that. This confused me a little and he could tell by the look on my face that I wasn't sure what he meant, so he told me to stick it out for a while, and he would, in due time, show me what he meant. And after a while, if I still wanted to go be a Teacher's Aid, he would support my decision.

Sosa: Safe to say that it worked out?

Randy (Laugh): Yeah, you could definitely say that.

Sosa: You mentioned that Bobby told you he would show you how being a barber could impact people...How did he do that?

Randy: Good question. Each morning from 6am to 8am Bobby would convene the class for what he called "Shop Talk." This would be the time where he would explain the ins and outs of being a barber and what that meant. This is where I learned that cutting hair is just a small part of what being a barber is. Being a barber is about being professional, courteous, empathetic, trustworthy, and reliable. Often times these talks would lead to applying these values to our everyday lives outside the shop.



## Stateville C.C. Barber College



Sosa: Did these values end up bleeding into your life outside the shop?

Randy: Oh, without a doubt. As I spent more and more time in the shop, I found my social skills developing in a way that was surprising to some that knew me. When I would greet people, it would be warmly. I began using words like “please,” “thank you,” “pardon me,” and I began making friends with people I would never have thought I’d be friends with. And this naturally began to happen outside the shop as well. Slowly my identity of Randy the Barber began to form.



Sosa: How did you end up seeing how being a barber could impact people around you?

Randy: This happened when I was assigned to the Health Care Unit to be the barber. At that time most of the men who lived in the infirmary were terminally ill. Their lives were a constant battle with pain, loneliness, and death. But when I would get them out of their cells and sit them in my chair, I could see cutting a physical and feel a spiritual change in them. For that 30-40 minutes I would spend cutting their hair, their lives felt normal again. Their otherwise dark day would be brightened because of that haircut. That is when I truly knew that barbering was my calling.

Sosa: It sounds like what you’re saying is that the barber college and those “shop talks” helped you become a better man.

Randy: That is absolutely the case. Nearly everything that was ever discussed during shop talks that correlated barbering with life ended up being true. There were some lessons that ended up being very true.

Sosa: Do you have an example of one?

Randy: Yes, it was about what to do if and when someone from the LGBTQ community wanted a haircut. For most men, being in prison, we are hyper-aggressive and our masculinity is of the utmost importance. That being said, it is an unwritten rule to never associate with anyone who is LGBTQ. If you do, your masculinity comes into question. So the lesson that was always discussed was to be a successful and respected barber, one must be inclusive to all people, no matter their identity. Professionalism must extend to everyone. This lesson was tested on me when I went to Galesburg.

Sosa: What happened in Galesburg?

Randy: After transitioning to Galesburg, I quickly was hired in the Barber Shop. It wasn’t long after that the first LGBTQ person came into the shop for a haircut. When it happened, the other barbers quietly refused service. It was then that those shop talk lessons came into play. I invited him to my chair and treated him like any other client. I was respectful, professional, courteous, and did my best to make the experience pleasant for him. I kept hearing Bobby say in my head, “They are just people who need their hair cut like everyone else. Their money spends just like everyone else’s. If you treat them respectfully, you’ll have a client for life.”

Sosa: What was the response from other barbers?

Randy: Of course, I got razzed a little, but when they saw how well I got paid, they were envious. In truth, I didn’t care what anyone thought. In my mind, my main objective was going home and being a successful barber, and that means being inclusive.



# Stateville C.C. Barber College



Sosa: When was it that you truly felt that being a barber changed your life?

Randy: It was when I was resentenced. My entire presentation to the judge was centered around my transformation because of barbering. What made it so impactful was it was clear that what I was presenting wasn't just a show. The state and the judge could tell that there was a real change in me. Plus, Bobby was there to testify to my character and his witness to my change. His words carried serious weight for me. In the end, I went from having 60 years to serve to 27 years to serve, and that categorically would not have happened without barber college.

Sosa: What are your plans in regards to your barber career upon your release?

Randy: I know that I will be cutting hair for a living and that getting started won't be easy. It is going to take a bit of time to build a client base. I am a hustler. I've already got 1000 business cards to pass out. I've got numerous opportunities in different barber shops, so I'm in good shape. I have to allow my work to speak for itself. My nephew will video my cuts for social media, so as long as I stay focused, success will come.

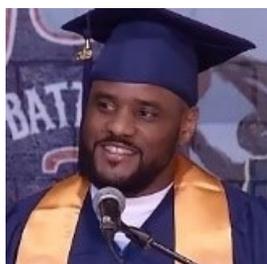
Sosa: What advice would you give to new barber students?

Randy: First, figure out what you actually want to get out of Barber College. If you are looking for real change in your life, the kind that transforms your world in a positive way, then throw yourself into becoming a barber. Let go of old behaviors, thought patterns, ego, and pride. Have patience in order to build your barbering skills. Timidness is your enemy when cutting hair, so be fearless. Take instruction when given and always ask questions when you don't understand. And, of course, study your book. You **cannot** pass the state board exam without studying.

Sosa: Is there anything else you would like to say?

Randy: Yes...to anyone who has influence within IDOC...Barber College is a true transformational program. There is enough evidence at this point that proves this. If you follow those who have gone through the Barber Program and have been released, nearly all are out there living successful and meaningful lives. If given the proper support, Barber College could be the most successful program within IDOC. If there was a Barber College in at least half of the prison in Illinois, IDOC would and could move in the direction they've laid out in their "Mission Statement." It's a matter of will. To those who are thinking about signing up for Barber College...picking up those clippers **SAVED MY LIFE.**

*Editor's Note:* Special thanks to **Devon Terrell** for collecting submissions from students in Sheridan CC's Barber College and for facilitating a workshop to Lewis Squad 2 Students on a "process for writing a life well-lived:



- P: Positive Affirmations
- R: Rhythm
- O: Observation
- C: Culture
- E: Expression
- S: Say it Out Loud
- S: Start from the Top



## poetry Corner

On April 22nd and in honor of national poetry month, **Rayon Sampson** facilitated open-mic sessions in North Park study halls at Stateville CC. He asked participants to provide their own definitions of the word “poetry,” and here are some of those:

POETRY IS...

“drawing out the understanding and meaning of life.” “a skeletal bridge linking words with thoughts.”  
“MESSY AFFIRMATION OF OUR HUMANITY.” “a snapshot of the rollercoaster of life.”  
“penned or spoken word beyond the mold of me.” “WHAT ONCE WAS AND IS EVER MORE TO BE.”  
“therapy for the soul.” “thoughts expressed in a rhythmic, artistic manner.” “spiritual experience of words.”

### Reflection Of Life By **Dwight Thomas**

Deep thoughts inside meditation reflecting shattered windows  
these are the fires of life that have been put out that we work so hard to rekindle.  
I am dubious of life’s purpose, yet it still peaks my interest  
looking for things that lost forever while being caught in the middle of a tempest.  
Extravagant goals set, but a detour from life’s trials and tribulations makes a sane person  
re-evaluate themselves and look for another occupation.  
I yearn for something unseen because it’s based on someone’s perception of life and  
whose perception is right or wrong are the thoughts I entice.  
What lies beneath an uncarved surface destined for a breakthrough in evolution-  
a change-ordained life, and new beginnings that incorporate the revolution  
my thoughts are destined to ignite the mind that delivers meaning to the world.  
What you believe in and what you value most is the reason the earth twirls to give meaning to life  
beyond your comprehension is the same as non-existence.  
Yet I know what I live for, so I seek out my destiny in life with persistence.  
When in thought too long you slice at the brinks of insanity.  
So, there is a line carved with a knife.  
Past, present, and future in the same thought sums up my “Reflection of life”.



### History of Expensive Elevation by **Escobar**

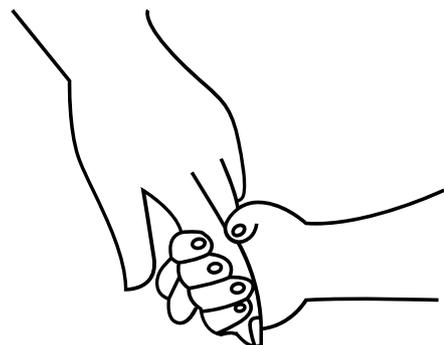
Buried extremely deep in our institutions and our cultural practices,  
founded on the beautiful principles of equality and justice-  
principles that have guided us with proper insight that we have yet to fully appreciate  
the nature and function of (History, the Expensive Elevation)  
We must all account for the history that we carry individually and collectively within us...  
Certain moments in our history or just in history period are ours to be the difference necessary to  
evolve our society.  
(History: the Expensive Elevation) is mental stimulation that makes my robust imagination more vivid,  
and as I receive it in my brain, my mind creates something to put back into the mix of history.  
(History: the Expensive Elevation) is my mental diet  
that opens my mind up and allows me connection to a range of emotions in a useful way  
that feels like a tower is being built in my mind, with each of my precursors, gifts and talents.  
Contributing to this space within me and the more I expose myself to (History: the Expensive  
Elevation) the more that tower keeps building me, mentally, physically, and spiritually.  
I’m able to perceive that the only knowledge that’s new to man is the (History: the Expensive  
Elevation) he’s unaware of... ESCOBAR

Mother by **Eva Morris**

I don't know where to begin...  
I searched and waited all my life, doing this caused me trauma and strife.  
Addictions took you away from me and you life, I swear was never happy...  
I don't even know where to begin...  
sitting at the window waiting for you - hours and days.  
But you didn't show. Been waiting for you all my life and  
finally I found out you had died. 25 years ago, but I believed they lied.  
I'm so sad you left me behind, abandoned and rejected, was very unkind.  
Sepsis and OD is how you left, did anybody show up, did anyone come?  
I truly did but it didn't even matter. I never had a mom and you left me with  
people who abused and raped me. It wasn't your fault, you didn't know what you were doing,  
all of the pain well it kept snowballing.  
I know you're in heaven waiting for me, It's your turn to wait and my choice is to stay clean.  
I never wanted my children to feel this way.  
It's soul sickness and feeling so empty.  
It's a hole in my soul only you can fill.  
So, it will always remain until I see you again.  
I remember long ago when I found myself in your place, in rehab coming  
down from drowning my pain.  
I looked in the mirror and I saw your face. I cried and sobbed so hard at that moment,  
that I gave you my grace, 100%,  
Life catches up and we are one and the same. Now I am you and I am in your place.  
I now see how addiction steals your life, made you die alone in shame and disgrace,  
because you were spinning and spinning and getting no place.  
I know nothing about you, birthday middle name, nothing at all.  
I only saw one picture of you. You were so pretty, tiny, and cute. I craved your love.  
This curse has to end and I'm putting my foot down.  
Coming back to my children in a whole loop to rebound.  
God is so good and I need to let go, so when I se you in heaven finally...  
Well you already know.

I love you mother, from as you call me,

Sister.



## Poetry Corner

By Ryan Miller

As I perused section IV in *The Sentences that Create Us* looking for a prompt, the one that immediately caught my attention was, "Writing the Poem of the Moment" by Ellen Ross. Not only because I love to write poetry and lyrics, but the idea of trying to capture a single moment in time and articulate it with as much detail and emotion as possible seemed absolutely irresistible.

As someone who is obsessed with writing sung lyrics all day every day, I can't really recall any other time in my life when the entire vision of a project just hit me instantaneously! It was as if the artistic approach, the concept, the idea, the lyrics, - everything invaded my mind all at once virtually creating itself the "moment" I merely read the title of her essay!

I love how Ross says, "Any moment is interesting if you explore it deeply enough," and how she advises her students in the creative process to "take us slowly through the moment. Stretch it out through description, detail, and metaphor." Though she also asserts we need to offer our readers, "close observation and just enough reflection."

Hopefully, the following poem will reflect that I have correctly interpreted Bass's prompt and advice - creating a piece rich in description and detail but expertly balanced and not too long or boring.

### 3-Point Stance by Ryan Miller

Eye on the goalpost  
I'm bout to score almost  
4th & inches go the distance  
Endzone is so close  
No & I won't choke  
Arose from the compost  
I'll grapplin' hook I'll catapult  
& javelin pole vault  
Over these pitfalls  
My failures & past faults  
The gossip & the losses - yeah -  
& all of their insults  
The minor chord tone notes  
This moment won't postpone  
It's pedal to the metal  
I'll go motorsport full force  
No & I won't wait  
The wheels they rotate  
I gotta go for broke  
Until I've broken the rope tape

Excel & accelerate  
When haters exhale hate  
No you can't derail me  
My faith is my failsafe  
Game is already won  
No sprint it's a marathon  
Iron man spartan  
& decathlon triathlon  
So onward Christian soldier  
Press forward I'll carry on  
& carry this cross  
All the way to the finish line  
Ball when it snaps  
Offensive launch an attack  
I'm breakin' down the rival  
Opposition defense  
w/ bated breath I'm waiting  
let the battle commence  
w/ the titans the combatants  
Giants I'm up against  
Crowd as it chants  
My sense heighten enhance  
Suspense is overwhelmin'  
Anticipation intense  
But I'm holdin' my position  
Till he gives the command  
I'm on the line of scrimmage  
In my 3-point stance

In "3-Point Stance," I did my best to thoroughly convey the metaphor of a football player at the line of scrimmage waiting for the ball to snap, the overall anxiety, frustration, anticipation, angst, etc. I feel on a daily basis waiting for the "moment" - my moment - our moment, not being allowed to participate in the moment!

I feel like I've been waiting for the quarterback (God, time, life...) to hike the ball for 18 years! I just want to play! I want to be in the game - I want action! I want to live! Put me in coach!!! I feel like I have so much to offer the world and I'm just dying for the opportunity to live up to my potential.

I feel like we're closer than ever to getting the victory - (Parole/truth-in-sentencing repealed) but we aren't moving. In fact, as time keeps passing by, and its seconds slip through my fists, I feel more like I'm on the sideline! On the bench!

With that being said, failure is still not an option! I have no choice but to hold my position. Stare down the opposition with my game face on and whether the line in the poem "Until he gives the command" means the creator snapping the ball and providing me an opportunity or it means life or death and he is calling me home, either way I will stand resolute, resilient, with unshakable determination and resolve with my eyes on the goalpost ready for the moment in my 3-point stance.



## Poetry Corner

### Introduction and Poem by Donald “Talib” McDonald

“To me, poetry is somebody standing up, so to speak, and saying, with as little concealment as possible, what it is for him or her to be on earth at this moment” (Ellen Bass pp. 261-263). This poem seeks to address what it is for me to be on earth at this moment. People don’t see the value in each other any more. They make snap decisions about what they’re ignorant of or unfamiliar with, like being cut off in a sentence because someone assumed they knew what you were about to say. Do you know how something tastes before you taste it?

“Arrested Development,” a rap group from the 1980’s, made a song called “Mr. Wendle”. Mr Wendle is a homeless person that people walked by, never listening to what he had to say about his life’s experiences. However, Mr. Wendle was a smart individual that people ignored. Historically, we say things like “birds of a feather, flock together,” not seeing the individual, but taking comfort in assuming the worst about each other.

So, for your consumption I wish to nourish you with a thought; please consume.

### “Apple”

Red’s a juicy apple, with wet droplets of condensation formed into a beads racing down waxy side of cool refreshing flesh.

A nutrient-rich sandwich glaring outward from its perch on an empty steel table, Boldly jetting out from a yellow pasty wall, the table is lit log light wading through a narrow six feet tall, three inch wide window that creates a dull beige hue into the depth of an other wise empty room.

Apple languishes in a vacuum, attempting to thrust nutrition through an open door where people notice him, but only glance at his presence.

A refreshing looking morsel that no one imagines

though a delicious appearing fruit, full of vitamins is there for the taking, and free to enjoy and consume, they walk by.

They assume something is off, a trap to a spring, a misdeed to be done, but nothing to be gained. Now, dry brown spots dissolve into ragged holes as decay fruit flies consume apple’s once smooth waxy flesh. They taking from within, his nutrients and vitamins, his hydration and health.

Finally swept up... to be discarded as trash, another book judge by it’s cover, a fruit outside his bowl, no context to know, but he was an apple; you can get a lot from apple.

### Conclusion

Often times prisoners sit alone in their cells silos of wisdom. Told to do page four, stay to yourself, we are microconsumers of society, a sample of what society believes and how we behave. Somehow we gain confidence from viewing others in a negative light. Our attitude keeps us from learning from each others’ experiences and becoming the best people we can be. “Apple” is my way of saying we could learn so much from each other, make our world safe, and grow beyond our expectations.

“Apple” shows how we wasted our potential based on assumptions we have no evidence to support because we spend our lives tearing others down to build ourselves up. Knowledge is nutrition and information vitamins humanity should consume; instead, we let it decay on empty tables in isolated places we walk by thinking no one else wanted it. So why should I, to be lost for ever, or wasted based on faulty information, or with no context to make the proper decision?



Jonah by **Mishunda Davis-Brown**

Jonah, a prophet of God, received a message from the Lord against the city of Ninevah, “preach against it because of its wickedness.” Jonah, not up for the task, caught himself running away and ended up swallowed and stuck inside the belly of a great fish. Like Jonah, many have found themselves consumed, entrapped, at a standstill, and/or stuck in their situations. Stuck can be mentally, spiritually, or physically. Stuck is stuck.

People find themselves stuck for many reasons. For example, the rich who think money will keep them happy until it no longer does. The prisoner who feels hopeless because he or she sees no way out. The addict in the maze of addiction who can’t seem to stop using, The Christian going through the motions yet feeling dead inside. All stuck like Jonah in their own way.

Jonah couldn’t move forward in completing the mission that God had previously gave him due to his bound condition, yet while in the belly of the fish Jonah renewed his thinking. Verse 7 says “when my life was ebbing away I remembered you Lord.” To remember is to have a thought or think. So Jonah clearly did some thinking in the belly, He goes on to say in the same verse “my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.” So, he did some praying in the belly. Then in verse 9 he says, “But I with a song of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you,,,” so he did some thanking and sacrificing in the belly, and lastly in this same verse he says, “Salvation comes from the Lord,” so he did some believing in the belly.

In his darkest moment when he saw no way out, he called upon the Lord and for him to call on the Lord he had faith that God could change his situation. The Bible says in Hebrews 11:6 that without faith it’s not possible to please God. Why expect something from God if you don’t believe He can do it anyway, but Jonah did. It is in these times God will turn the bad for good using these times to bring us to repentance, to change, to learn, to grow, and to trust in him. So clearly He’s always at work and as Paul says in 2 Corinthians, “in our weakness He’s able to show His strength.”

It is while Jonah was in the belly of the fish that he began to transform his way of thinking. The bible says to be transformed is by the renewing of our minds. Jonah could’ve used his time in the fish belly complaining, moping, feeling sorry for himself, wasting time taking swimming practice, but he used his time thanking the Lord for saving his life and chose to put his trust in Him again in Verse 9 declaring that “Salvation comes from the Lord.” It is in this moment the miracle happened and Jonah went from stuck to unstuck because in Verse 10 God commands the fish to release Jonah. Once he’s released he goes on to deliver the Lord’s message the second time around. This shows that God is a God of second chances, forgiveness, grace mercy, and deliverance. So I encourage the prisoners who don’t see a way out to renew their thinking and trust that the Lord can and willing to deliver you from the belly of the fish, the wealthy who no longer finds comfort in his riches to know that there’s peace and joy in the Lord, the addict who’s trapped in the cycle of addiction to trust that the Lord can bring you out, and the Christian who’s dead on the inside believe that the Lord can and will refresh your spirit upon request. Yet, as Jonah, you must believe. Change any defeated thinking and turn to God. Trust in His delivering power that is able to deliver you and He will, as He delivered Jonah.



# THE AMPLIFIER

with Alex Negrón



In “SOCIO 29000 Diversity and Social Justice, I felt it was important to not only do “class” work, but also to take the work done in class and get it out for the world to read. Two of the assignments done in this course were creating social justice platforms in honor of the Real Rainbow Coalition--The Black Panthers, Young Lords, and Young Patriots--and a letter to an elected official. What we have here is a 12-Point Platform by students John Knight, Kyle Starks, Dameion Thurman, and René Amigón. What I love about this platform is that they addressed four areas that need to be attained when it comes to social justice and liberation. “United Stand” is the home of their movement, and after reading this, I’m sure you would enjoy their platform.

In the letter to an elected official, Bree Williams writes to State House Representative Anna Moeller from Elgin, Illinois. He wrote this representative to support HB5219 to repeal truth-in-sentencing. We need to get involved if we want change. Allan G. Johnson believes that we must fight for justice within the understanding that we might not see the change we expect right away. In Bree’s conclusion, he makes the case that we can bring change in our starved and under-resourced communities by reaching out to at-risk youth. He also makes the demand to be respected by people of privilege and passing HB5219 is a step towards gaining that respect as an incarcerated person, a very powerful and compelling story.

## UNITED STAND 12 POINT PROGRAM

by John Knight, Kyle Starks, Dameion Thurman, and René Amigón

1. We want freedom to determine the destiny of our oppressed community.
2. We want true education for our people.
3. We want a transformative approach to put inner city schools on the same level with their suburban neighbors, including new facilities.
4. We want our children to be prioritized and not used as pawns in political warfare.
5. We want ample investment in the infrastructure of our underdeveloped, under-resourced communities.
6. We want two community centers in every poor community. In each center there will be free vocational skills training, child care, healthcare clinics, welfare aid, and mental health counseling. People who reside in the communities should be active members of the center to make sure resources go to those who need them.
7. We want reparations for all descendants of slavery.
8. We want, regardless of earned income, sex, gender, or any discriminatory factors, all housing (buildings, condos, studios, homes, etc...) in poor communities to be relegated to one-third of the current occupants at the same affordable rental prices, or offer one-third of the rentals to new occupants (from that community) at those same lower prices.
9. We want the state senate and congress to pass laws that lead to true criminal justice reform.
10. We want a bi-partisan supported approach to address gun-related crimes involving juveniles.
11. We want all in the incarcerated population to be given the rights to be able to have conjugal visits (if married) and to vote in all elections, state and federal.
12. We want a true rehabilitation system within all departments of corrections that will serve as a catalyst for all individuals in custody to successfully reacclimate into society.

### WE BELIEVE...

1. we can change the oppression of our communities through our own works within the community.
2. without knowing our true history, we will never be able to know what we can grow into as a people.
3. this will increase the graduation rate, leading to more college enrollment, which would reduce the poverty rate within the inner-city.
4. children should get the chance just to be kids, away from societal harms and hunger pangs.
5. when our environment looks more like the people in it, the negative narratives sift and positivity sprouts.
6. in order to elevate a community out of poverty, the people of that community must be directly allowed to have the agency to obtain the needed resources and the power to determine when they use them.
7. because of the promise of 40 acres and a mule to our ancestors was not given, descendants of slaves should be given at least the equivalent of 40 acres and a mule.
8. gentrification is a grave detriment to residents of black and brown communities, and must be ended. If the neighborhood is to be improved, both previous and current residents should be allowed to enjoy the benefits of improvements.
9. this will stop the inhumanity of mass incarceration that affects black and brown communities heavily.

# THE AMPLIFIER

10. that there needs to be proactive measures instead of reactive measures, so that the juveniles never reach the point of having or wanting to have a gun.

11. the strongest and most important bonds are to family and community, and these bonds should not be disconnected by force. A person serving a prison sentence should not lose citizenship or their humanity! This is needed for a successful and mentally healthy re-entry into society.

12. every man, woman, and child has the ability to cause harm or do wrong, but in contrast, also has the capability to change and actually learn from their mistakes.

Dear Ana Moeller,

My name is Bree D. Williams #M01942, I am an individual in custody housed at Sheridan C.C. in Illinois. I have been incarcerated for twenty one (21) years now. Currently I am a student with Lewis University and am in my sophomore year. I am earning my bachelor's of arts degree with a minor in business. I am an advocate for prison reform, a feminist-abolitionist, and an incarcerated man who deserves another chance at freedom from incarceration.

Rep. Moeller, I have taken interest in H.B. #5219 and what it stands for. I understand that this bill if passed will reduce the overcrowding of the prisons in Illinois and within the Illinois Department of Corrections. As an incarcerated individual I feel that this particular bill creates hope, attitude adjustment toward positive thinking and acts, and an overall sense of liberation within the incarcerated community. Currently the Illinois Department of Corrections is overcrowded due to unlawful police arrests, excessive sentencing by judges, plea bargains and most of all truth-in-sentencing.

I would like for you to consider supporting H.B. #5219 because it will help cut down the overcrowding of jails and prisons here in Illinois; it will give deserving incarcerated men and women another chance at being a productive citizen in today's society. Currently there are many long term offenders - men & women - who have been given excessive sentences, whom of which have been prisoners for more than 10 years and have not been given a single chance at redemption. Here I say the problem lies in the Criminal Justice System. The Illinois Criminal Justice System is corrupt, unjust, illogical, a downright shame, and has failed this state.

In my twenty one (21) years of incarceration I have witnessed many men fight tooth and nail to reach a life for themselves; a life of physical and mental freedom from incarceration - from beyond the walls and gates of prison - by way of education and progressive reconstruction of self and those around them. I myself am one example. I believe that there are incarcerated men and women within the IDOC who have worked toward and are working toward changing their lives for the better and have built up proof of positive change. The proof is out there, all one has to do is look at the great work, progress \_\_\_ men and women - who truly seek redemption - have put in to gain the status of becoming a non-incarcerated individual. We are self-rehabilitating ourselves.

I feel that a major problem is that we long term offenders have not been given the proper chances to earn our freedom. I have seen multiple times where a low level offender with no education has been released and within three (3) months he has returned on another low level crime just to be patted on the butt and sent on his way back to society. While we long term offenders get very little to no chances at freedom, the constant catch-and-release is a direct stop to the face. I strongly believe that if the majority of us long term offenders with a college education were to be released, over 90% of released individuals will not succumb to recidivism. I believe that those of us who are released and do not return to a life of crime or imprisonment will become positive minds to the communities of Illinois.

With all of the violence in Illinois done by the youth I feel that this is done mostly because there are not many true leaders for positive change out in society. Majority of the highly involved men and women who advocate for positive change amongst the people - and who can grab a hold of the ears and minds of today's youth - are incarcerated. I believe a grand solution to this problem is for the voice of us long term offenders to be heard. We need to be seen by the public that not all of us incarcerated men and women are defined by our offense. I humbly ask that you please vote on H.B. #5219 to be passed, and please spread the word.

In conclusion, I ask that you please invest some of your time to examine H.B. #5219 and what it brings to the table, how it will affect the overcrowding of the IDOC, and how it will allow deserving incarcerated individuals a second chance at life on the outside. It is read in "Five Forces of Oppression," by Iris Young, in the section of powerlessness that because professional men and women have privilege and authority they feel they must be respected. While this may be true we incarcerated non-professional individuals seek to be respected and taken seriously as well. Our power is limited, but our presence is strong!

I believe that the future of this state and its Criminal Justice System depends on what is done now to improve the problems of the past, present, and what may come about in the future, "We must dig deep into the past if we are to build a better future." Core concepts for Social Justice Education by Adams and Zuniga.



## Book Review



An Introduction to the Simple Stories  
by Vaughn “P/Nut” Washington

Langston Hughes said, “The character of my simple-minded friend is really very simple; it is just myself talking to me.” But, “By the end of 1965 he had abandoned his twenty-three year effort to use humor as a weapon in the civil rights struggle.” In 1965, he said, “The racial climate has gotten complicated and bitter so that cheerful and ironic humor is less understandable to people.”<sup>1</sup> The Black writer Langston Hughes was a prominent member of the Harlem Renaissance, a group of poets, playwrights, and novelists that produced outstanding literature in the first half of the 20th century from New York City’s Harlem. Langston Hughes wrote books, plays, and poems, and he is probably best known for his poetry, which includes *Mother to Son* and *Harlem*. The playwright Lorraine Hansberry adopted a line from his poem “Harlem” for the title of her Broadway hit play *A Raisin in the Sun*.

I have only met a couple of guys so far at North Park University that were familiar with Langston Hughes’ *Simple Stories*: Robert Maury and C.D. Everett. My hope is to introduce these stories to our entire community. Even though they might be considered by some as Black Literature, I consider them as American Literature, as American folklore because Jessie B. Semple, nicknamed Simple, is a Harlemitte of the highest order a home-grown philosopher that spins tales of his experiences and adventures as a Black man in New York City. But I do not see these stories as black stories; they are definitely American stories: a part of the folklore of America.

<sup>1</sup> Faith Berry. *Langston Hughes before and beyond Harlem*. Lawrence Hill and Company, Westport, Conn. 1983.

By **Raymond Youngblood**

First I’d like to thank the editors for allowing me to live in the moment of this opportunity, being able to express the strength of self-education. When barriers and specific rules seem as if they are implemented to discourage from our growth and goals, we must open our minds and hearts a bit wider to obtain focus on a determinational aspect. This notion gives me the confidence to identify with my brothers of Lewis University: students and Teaching Fellows. On multiple occasions I’ve experienced the importance of achievements. I’m inspired to prioritize my education personally and generally. To the teachers who I’ve met indirectly through their intentions and impressions, I’m honored to know of pioneers who stepped on our side and affected everyone; thank you, Respect! Women, my mother Doretta Youngblood is Assata Shakur. So strong, yet fragile. I fell in love with her identity. Booker T. Washington would beam with pride! Assata voices her articulation of the treacherous conditions but stands firm in her truth of persistence. Malcolm X would cry with admiration! Assata’s resistance instantly reminded me of my current circumstances and how she shared her vulnerabilities to a public of racist, stereotyping groups of people who perceived her a certain way, but never had a clue who she was. Sounds familiar, huh? Assata is our example of what a pioneer is. We’re lucky to understand this because when we know better, we do better! Let Assata’s legacy live within our every action, complimenting the beautiful traits of loving yourself and others!

# Shout Outs

**Much Gratitude** to EFA Beltran, Officer Posey, and all other staff in the Academic Programming Building at Sheridan CC for your dedicated work and support of educational opportunities for all.

**Huge Thanks** to Sgt. Johnson, Officer Byrd, and other Sheridan CC front gate staff for their professionalism and positivity, always sending educational volunteers off to the Academic Programming Building with a smile.

**Shout Out** from Sheridan Correctional Staff to **Officer Dahmann** for being a good human being.

**Congrats** to the following Sheridan GED Graduates:

Charles Willis  
Maurice Brown  
Toniac Jackson  
Jacob White  
Tristan Bass  
Ashton Pierce  
Kavari Smith  
Dashaun Villa  
Jordan Kaye  
Jason Fonvill  
Leon Ford  
D'Andre Lofton  
Dwayne McCoy, Jr.  
Jay Mendoza  
Valentino Smith  
Joseph Matthews  
Marcus Smith  
Garey Haskell  
Jeremy Gossett



**Special Kudos to Spree's Son  
Dwayne McCoy Jr. for getting his GED!**

**Great Job** to the participants in Stateville Law Librarian Ms. Elmore's book group for reading *Wicked!* We look forward to publishing your book reports in our next edition.

**Appreciation** to Educator Ms. McGrath for super-speedy copy editing.

**Special Thank You's** to EFA Costabile, Sgt. Brown, and all other staff in Stateville's Education Building for their ongoing support.

An Honor and a Privilege: Inspired in Part by Raymond Youngblood  
By **Mike Simmons**

It's been a year now since my transfer here to Sheridan, and working as a Teaching Fellow for Lewis University. One of my main takeaways thus far has been watching the classroom practices unfold inside of the cellhouse. It's been nothing short of amazing to see people that are not part of the Lewis program so engaged in the dialogue, and in effect, becoming an extended and very important part of the educational experience. With that said, I want to encourage every single person throughout the state that does not allow educational space (or lack thereof) to become a barrier for growth and healthy development. Whether it's legal (shout out to Tall Mikel), academic, or organizing for parole and voting in prison, let's keep working together and building each other up. Peace + Love.

Editors' Note: Outside readers can find an electronic version of this issue (and past issues) of *Feather Bricks* on North Park University Writing Center's website: <https://www.northpark.edu/academics/undergraduate-programs/academic-assistance/writing-center/>