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Story to Story: E Pluribus Unum: A Collection of Stories by Thirty-Two Individuals from University of Richmond and Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center

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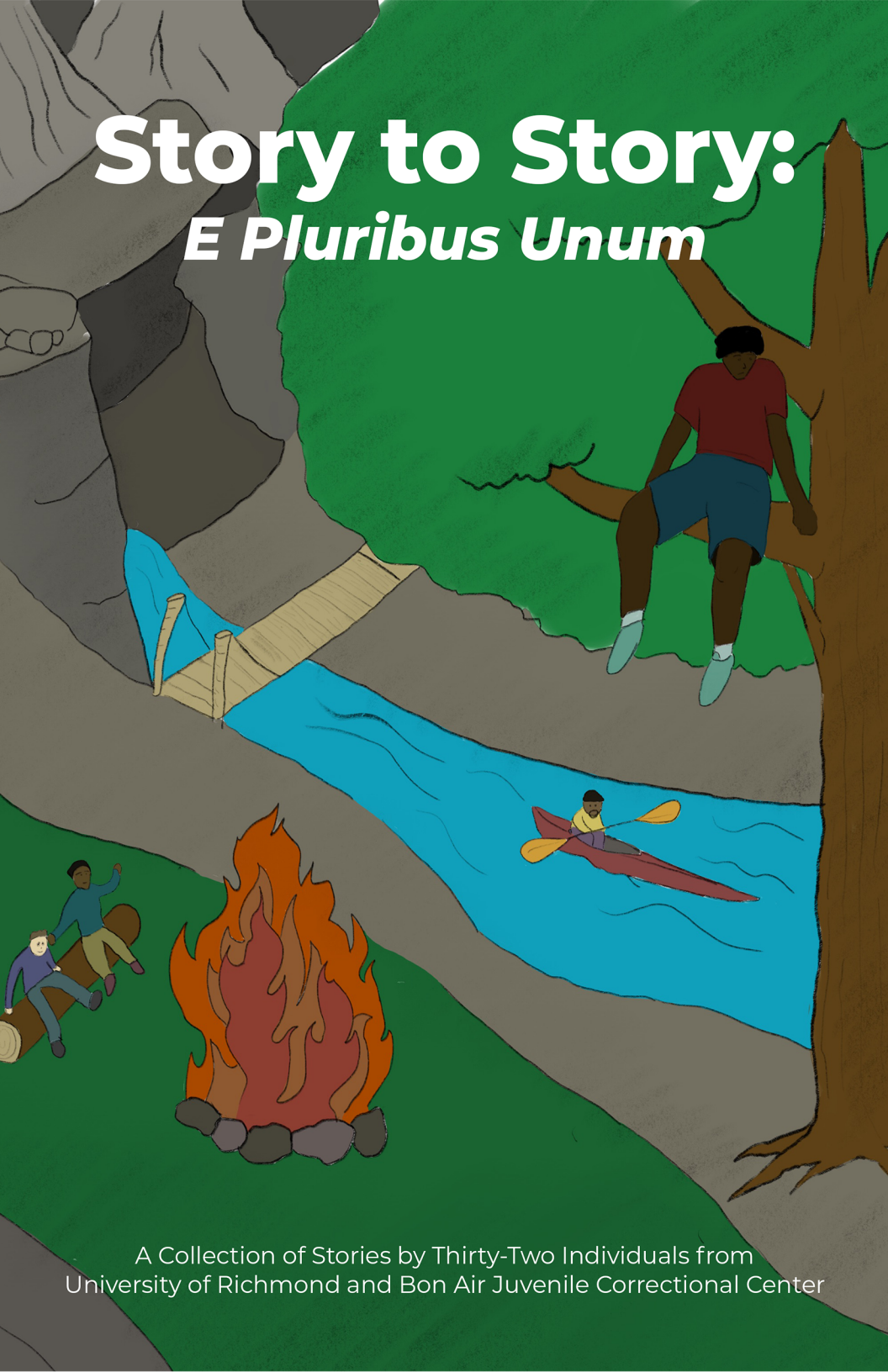
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Story to Story: *E Pluribus Unum*



A Collection of Stories by Thirty-Two Individuals from
University of Richmond and Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center

Content Joyful Grateful
Happy Blessed Expressed
Ecstatic thoughtful optimistic
Thankful fortunate!
inspired Thankful
grateful Ready optimistic
THANKFUL

A collection of words written down by each member of the Monday night group describing our thoughts on the experience.

Story to Story: *E Pluribus Unum*

A Collection of Stories by Thirty-Two Individuals from
University of Richmond and Bon Air Juvenile
Correctional Center

Dear Reader,

How many times have you touched a penny? When is the last time you stopped to actually read what it says? You see, if you really take the time to look at a penny, engraved on it is “E Pluribus Unum”, meaning “out of many, one.” People are similar to pennies; we see the surface and examine them based on our own preconceived notions, but if we just took time to see what’s really there, the world would be a better place. Out of many, we are one and united we stand, story to story, hand in hand.

Our unity began as a storytelling workshop, but it has become so much more. We, the storytellers, are a group of 32 young individuals from the University of Richmond and Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center who have worked together to share our stories. During our time together, we got to know each other and ultimately wrote this book, which features stories that were chosen to be published by each partnership. Our only expectation going into this project was this publication. However, we never had a specific prompt nor subject in mind. We wanted to tell our stories for the sake of telling them; we wanted to let the stories speak for themselves.

While many projects associated with Bon Air act as mentorship programs, we actually strove to foster a sense of equality between each Richmond student and Bon Air participant. Specifically, our goals were to build a healthy, short-term, peer-to-peer relationship as we use stories to bridge across difference, collaborate with our partners in order to reflect on and understand our own lives in a new way, and tell a story about ourselves in a way that can be shared with others and helps others understand us.

Each partnership had the choice of editing the stories after writing them for the book, and of the extent of the edits. We could either choose to leave them as written, or edit for grammar. We chose to let each group decide to honor the nature of the partnership, as well as maintain the integrity and voice of the stories as they were written. Dispersed between each set of stories are quotes sharing one thing we took away from this experience, in order to demonstrate the impact this project has had on the storytellers.

On the night of our last workshop, we wrote down our preconceived notions about this experience, and our thoughts after having gone through this together. Some of these initial sentiments include:

On the first night I thought...this was going to be fun. - Robert

On the first night I thought...that this was going to be different like people trying to talk to us, like preach or something. - Jermaine

On the first night I thought...it might be difficult to make connections with my partner. - K. Stewart

On the first night I thought...this experience was going to be exciting but nerve wracking. I was nervous about what my partner would think of me and this project. - Amanda

On the first night I thought...that I wouldn't learn anything new. - Troy V.

On the first night I thought...that I wouldn't find much in common with my partner, or that they wouldn't want to open up to me. - Kayla

On the first night I thought...*that wow I signed the paper but I aint think they would really come* - Jarell

On the first night I thought...*it was cool that y'all came.* - Naqwon

On the first night I thought... *that I wouldn't be able to talk to him as a friend* - Bianca

On the first night I thought...*this would be a terrific experience.* - Jaquan

On the first night, I thought... *I wouldn't be able to connect with Hannah.* - Troy L.

On the first night, I thought... *My life would not be interesting to my partner.* - Hannah

The stories that we shared helped deepen our relationships with our partners, and, for many, changed our initial thoughts about the project as a whole. We hope that by reading the stories we wrote, you will understand the remarkable connections that each partnership made during this experience. While reading, please keep in mind that each partnership chose the specific prompt and story they wished to share, and that the stories contained in these pages are by no means all of what transpired while storytelling. Each partnership got to know one other through stories of all kinds, but these specific ones mean the most to them. We hope you enjoy.

Richmond, VA
April 2018

“Everyone has their own battles to deal with, but coming together and sharing them is one of the most powerful things we can do.” - Bianca

Tell Me A Story About A Place You Are From

Robert

The place that im from is called Jackson Ward and it's located in eastside of VA. They are actually the projects and to most people or outside people, they're known as the Ghetto! Growing up in the Ject's, for me wasn't bad but for people that wasn't from JW it was. Every thing that bad people do goes on around JW. Shooting, selling drugs, fighting & Everything else. But it's not all bad. We had the best basketball & baseball team and most of our bonds were formed from sports and it brought us together. I don't mind telling people where Im from because it doesn't defind who i am and it actually reminds and motivates me not to go back, unless it's for something good. Just because you are from a rough place doesn't mean you are a bad person.

Through all the darkness and the clouds
I still shine bright.
Like a diamond in the sun you will always
See my light.
Through great smiles formed from happiness
And joy you will never see my pain.
Through hard trials and tough times
I will always remain the same.

Brooke

I didn't always smile when I heard the word, "home". I have lived in my current house since I was 2. When I was in middle school, I constantly told my parents that I hated my house, and I begged them to move. I felt so unequal to my friends because they all lived in big, new houses in developments. My house is an old, white farmhouse, located on a busy, stressful

road with lots of traffic. There is always something falling apart in my house that my parents need to fix. My friends didn't have those concerns with their houses, and they had so many neighborhood friends to play with. I felt like I didn't fit in anywhere because of my house.



My friends all had fun basements to play in with games like ping pong and papa shot. Papa Shot. That was all I ever wanted. I thought it was the coolest thing ever. I was 11 years old, begging my dad to move to a new house with a basement, just so I could play Papa Shot. And I wasn't even good at basketball. It was just because my friends had it, and I couldn't. My basement is dark, spooky, saturated in dust, and made up of tunnels or alleyways. The ceiling is so low that most people need to crouch down. There is no space to play.

I soon learned what my house had, that my friends couldn't. My house has character. My house is unique. My house is like a maze; it's not organized like everyone else's houses. I learned that there is so much history to this house. My house is about 250 years old. We think. We don't have specific record, but my dad

has searched ancient library maps of our township to figure it out.

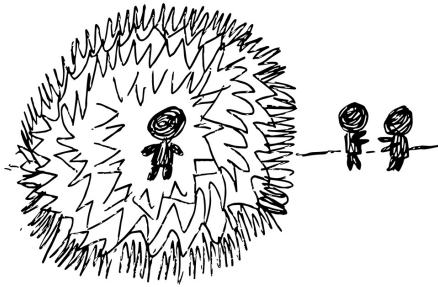
The tunnels in my basement can be explained too. It is believed that my house was a stop on the underground railroad. The tunnels in the basement made slave travel more secretive and safe. This incredible link to history is so valuable. Now, when I think of “home” I smile and remember how fortunate I am to be a part of something so unique.

*“I have a lot of stories I never really sat down and
thought about.” - Jarell*

Tell Me A Story About Something You Have Lost

Q. R.

When you feel like your Back is against the wall and you Don't have any options when your young and Impatient you tend to Do what you see and Im from southside Richmond where all you see is negative like shooting, Drug Dealing, stealing, and Drug using. and Before May 12, 2015 Thats all I knew That Day changed my life for the Better on May 12th I was Incarcerated and accused of RoBBery and that night I was Determined to make a Change. Since then I've Been Reading, Studying, and working towards my new goals that I set.



P. B.

When change comes in life, it can be shocking enough that your old way of life just can't be anymore. When I was in first grade, I lost my childhood and had to leave behind that freedom from worry and responsibility. My dad was sent to prison for abuse. I remember the police and social workers coming to my house and interviewing each of us on our own. I remember how weird it was that we were talking at night with police officers in the basement and how

orange the light looked on the wood paneling. Eventually they left and my young life was a mess. “I had the perfect life, and now everything’s ruined!” I told my mom. Dramatic, yes, but I was seven.

I remember going back to school and having a breakdown crying because I missed my dad. Little did I know, it was better he was gone. I can call it a loss, but for my family it was more like being freed. Twelve years later, we still remember every March 9th as “Liberation Day.”

I soon noticed the difference in myself. I had to be hardened to deal with the new stress and issues I dealt with at home. I went through the rest of my childhood with a new seriousness that I never saw in other kids. I always believed that no one else went through something like this. Their homes weren’t broken. I couldn’t share this part of my life. “Oh my dad travels for work a lot,” ya sure, that’s where he is. I did have my siblings for support though. They sheltered me as best they could, but we all grew up too fast. But without these experiences, I never would have gained my strong senses of maturity and empathy, and the closeness to my sibling that I value more than anything.

I took away.... "*a positive relationship.*" - A. King

Tell Me A Story About A Time When You Felt You Were Good at Something

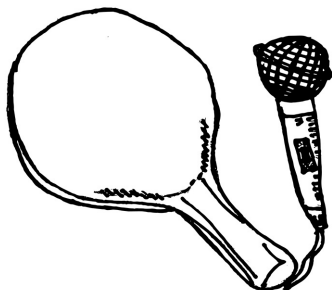
Zhiyou

When I was five years old, I always got sick. My parents thought I should do more exercise. Therefore, they asked me to play ping-pong ball. At the beginning, I did not like playing ping-pong because I could not get any points and it made me feel upset. However, I still persisted in learning for several years and my skill improved a lot. Luckily, I became a representative of my school to compete with opponents from other schools. I met an opponent who ran the first in last competition, I was nervous when I played with her. The score was pretty close between us. However, I still won that game under my confidence and efforts. Finally, to my surprise, I got number one for the ping-pong ball competition. I felt like I could do it and I was good at playing ping-pong. I felt pretty proud of myself.

Kalil

When I was 14 years old, I wanted to be a rapper. I thought I wasn't good enough when I recorded on school laptop. I stopped rapping because I didn't take it serious. I got locked up in 2015, when I was in a cell I decided to make music again. I got locked up in 2015, when I was in a cell I decided to make music again. I practiced and I couldn't wait to come home to release music. I came home in 2016 but never recorded because I felt like I couldn't make music. I got locked up months later in 2016 and decided to give rapping a try for the last time. I made music and look my time in the cell to practice. When I felt comfortable with my music, I started rapping to

other residents and staff. I knew I could rap because they wanted me to rap everyday and mom on the phone and they was so proud telling me I am going to be big one day. From that day on, I knew I was really good at music.



“Hope is very powerful and friends can be found in the most unexpected of places”. - Kayla

Tell Me A Story About An Unexpected And Difficult Memory

Jarell

When I was 16 years old, I was shot by a .38 caliber pistol. I woke up at my cousin house he wanted to go to the store. So as walking out the store some guys were out there arguing with some guys in a car. The guys in the car pulled out a gun and started shooting. The others shot back as running pass the crossfire. I ran back to the house as I shut the door. He tells me my arm's bleeding. So as the paramedics arrive they gave me morphine in my neck the I passed out. As I woke up the doctor told me i've been through surgery once they can't take the bullet out. I have to stay for more. Then I stayed for 3-4 weeks until I healed.

Matt

The year was 2004. My brother William had returned home with a new video game for us to play together on our brand new playstation 2. The game was Tekken 5 a japanese arcade style fighting game, in which two players battle it out to see who is the better opponent. Due to my love for the game and the countless hours I played it, I became fixated on Japanese culture. Ever since I was a little kid, knew one day that I had to visit Japan to fully experience its amazing culture. Flash forward to 2015, and I am made aware of an opportunity to travel to Japan for 3 months with my Japanese teacher Dr. Matsuzaki. At the time, I had only studied Japanese for about one year and was still a basic speaker. The journey to Japan was long and tiring, but when I finally arrived, the lengthy journey was worth it. Immediately, the breathtaking scenery on the drive to my new

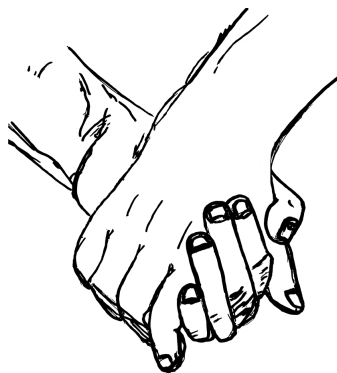
residence made me feel at home. During my first day of school, I had many mixed emotions. I was initially very scared because of my limited Japanese skills. To make matters worse, on the first day, I had to recite a Japanese speech in front of the whole school. Luckily though, I did well enough that I did not get laughed out of the building. For the next month, my experience was going fantastic, I was meeting many new people and I was visiting all of the iconic Tokyo landmarks I dreamed of. Sounds good right? Wrong! Around the 6th week of my trip in Tokyo I received some bad news over the phone. Sadly, my mother had suffered a stroke in our home in Baltimore. This was the first catastrophic health event that either of my parents had ever had, and I didn't know how to react. Here I was 6,000 miles away from my mother who just experienced the worst event of her life. It was my priority to leave Japan and get back to my family immediately. To my disappointment, I was told there was not much I could do and I would have to stay away from my family for the remainder of the three months. My attitude quickly shifted and I felt isolated with no one to talk to about the issues that my family was facing. Everyday I was feeling increasingly frustrated because I truly felt unable to help my family in any way. Being that my mother's health was at an all time low, I often worried if another dangerous health event would occur. Luckily, after about two weeks in the hospital my mother was transported back home and made a full recovery. As she progressively got more healthy, my worries were put at ease and I began to slowly become more optimistic about my trip. I began to appreciate the generosity exhibited by my Japanese peers and host families, and their graciousness helped me get through this difficult time.

*“Everyone is different and you have to learn how to
adapt to people differences.” - Robert*

Tell Me A Story About Your Best Friend

Troy V.

I've known my friend Sterling since I first moved to Virginia. He was in my second grade class and we instantly clicked. We did everything together in elementary school. We played sports, wrestled, played 2k and madden, and everything else. But when middle school came we kind of separated. I started chilling with one peer group and he was with another. The bond was still there we just didn't hang out as much. When Highschool came it was almost like that bond was gone. I still saw him as my brother, but at this time I was never in school so we almost never saw each other. This was when I started smoking and selling drugs so I was in a totally different lane than he was. So in September 2016 I got arrested and I will never forget that the first letter I got came from him. It was almost like we were back in Ms. Burley's second grade class. We started talking and catching up and the bond we had grew even stronger than it was before. Ever since then I've changed my values when it comes to who I let in my circle.



Amanda

I have known my best friend Riley for as long as I can remember. We met in preschool, and have been friends ever since. Our parents became best

friends with each other, my older sister became friends with Riley, and Riley's two younger brothers became friends with my younger brother. Our families grew up doing everything together, from having each other over for dinner, to going on beach trips. We were inseparable going into elementary school. Even though she threatened to end our friendship if I didn't join "The Cheetah Girls Club", I agreed to be a part of it because I valued our friendship so much, although I didn't LOVE the Cheetah Girls.

In middle school, we grew apart a little bit. We found our own individual friend groups, but always checked in with each other once in a while. We were still best friends even though we didn't go "downtown" together on Fridays after school.

Once in high school, we stayed with our respective friend groups. However, when winter track came around we both signed up, and Riley somehow convinced me to join the distance team with her. During both the winter and spring track seasons, we ran every run together, side by side, catching each other up on how our day was going and giving each other moral support. We even ran every race together until one of us pulled ahead at the end. Doing something as simple as running brought us back to being best friends. We set all of the same goals, the ultimate goal being co-track captains. After 3 years of being on the team, Riley and I's dreams came true as our names were called on to be the captains for the distance track team for our final two seasons.

Now Riley and I are across the country from each other, since I go to college in Virginia and she goes to college in California. We are now better friends than ever with our deep history and high school running experiences. Without her, I would not be the person I am today, as she constantly inspires me with her resilience, kindness, and grace.

I took away... “*knowledge [on] how to build friendships.*”
- Jermaine

Tell Me A Story About A Time You Stayed Silent

*This portion features a combined story from Tim and Eliz.
Tim's stories are displayed in bold while Eliz's are displayed
in standard print.*

it was june 2nd and it was a party i really wanted to go to but my mom said i could'nt so i had planed to go anyway

When my best friend's sister asked me to help plan my best friend's surprise birthday, I gladly took the offer. Little did I know, staying silent about the party around my friend was going to be more difficult than I thought.

as soon as she fell asleep i got dressed to leave + called my friend to come get me when he got to my house i snuck out the house when we got to the party it was 'live' turnt

At first, staying silent was only a little hard, exciting even. Sneakily handing invitations to friends when my friend wasn't around, asking for RSVPs in quick whispers, texting my friend's siblings about birthday decorations was all fun and games, until one day.

everyone i know was there the music was good an the food was ite But out of nowhere i herd someone screemmm my goverment name + nobody really calls me by my real name but family

I was in class with my friend, texting my friend's sister. My friend asked who I was talking to and I had to cover up the truth, but she could tell I was hiding something. When I finally confessed that I was texting her sister, I couldn't tell her why. I had to stay silent.

so then the music stops I hear it again + its my mom i was so embarrassed i could'nt mess up my rep so I

went to hide in the closet i was shocked she knew where i was after 10 mins she ended up leaving and i came out and told my boy we gotta go asap

Because I stayed silent, my friend thought her sister and I were talking about her behind her back and saying bad things. I had to pretend I was asking her sister if she was allowed to hang out with me at my house. Somehow, this turned into a fake argument about how she did not really want to hang out with me. Of course, the argument was fake on my part, but she believed it was real. Our pretend-anger at each other lasted for a whole day, but it was worth it in the end when I was able to finally explain the secret to her on the day of her party.



I took away... *“talking and learning.”* - Q. R.

Tell Me A Story About A Time You Felt Supported

Katherine

One night at my boarding school I was an emotional wreck from an exhausting week, and on top of that I was quite homesick. I had tried calling my parents, who felt hopeless being over an hour way. I had tried calling my brother who did not seem to care much at the time that I was in tears. However, neither phone call had helped me very much.

At loss at what to do, and who to talk to I strayed into the hallway of my dorm to go for a walk. The long quiet hallway of the dorm seemed to be particularly uninviting that evening. I continued to walk and eventually saw one of my dorm parents. I did not know her very well at the time, however when she looked at me with a comforting smile tears began to rush down my face. She hastily walked in my direction and gave me a hug. She did not say a word. She simply hugged me.

A few minutes later I found myself sitting on the couch in her apartment with a cup of chamomile tea in hand. I told her everything that was on my mind, and she reassured me that everything was going to be ok. We ended up sitting there for over two hours getting to know each other. She had seen me at my worst and I knew in that moment that she would play a pivotal role in my life.

From that night on she was my rock throughout boarding school, and was there for me when my parents could not be. She supported me and made the dorm feel like a second home. To this day Mrs. Boucher and I keep in touch. We text often and grab lunch whenever I am back home. From that night on our relationship has remained strong thanks to her supportive and understanding persona.

Solomon

As a kid when I was young I had difficulties making friends, but my grandma has always been there for me. I remember the time I asked my grandmother “when’s my mom was coming back” because at the time I didn’t understand death so she really didn’t want to break my heart so she told me “a few months”.

So when I went back to the school I asked could the people teach me days, months, and years. Eventually I learned ... when “a few months” passed I asked “where was my mom” that’s when she broke me the news that “she wasn’t coming back”.

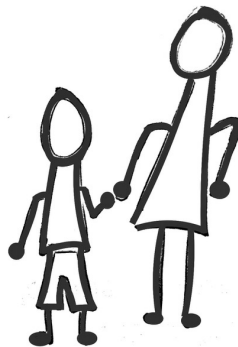
My first thought was how was I going to grow up without a mom everyone else has one. I cried that whole night and when she come to check on me. She told me to come to her room and she talked to me and comforted me and told me even though mom isn’t here im here for you now or something like that.

Our Poem

Emptiness derived from pain
The loss of a mother
Longing for home

You never know where
support come from
From a loved one
Or a new mentor
Support is all around

Support fills the emptiness
And creates strong
relationships
That we will feel forever.



“Youth at Bon Air are just like us, and locking them up is not the solution to rehabilitate or educate.” - Brooke

Tell Me A Story About Your Biggest Inspiration

Penny

My biggest inspiration is my cousin, Malik. He was always like a mentor to me. He played football, was the star quarterback, and he was the coolest guy in school; as he would often have introduced me as “my little cousin”. When my grandmother passed away, Malik got a wake-up call and wanted to something with his life. In 12th grade he became serious about school. He would go to his coaches, teachers, and speak with tutors to see what he could do to improve. Malik would always say he was trying to make it somewhere, and often gave me pep talks and said that I should do the same. After all of his hard work, he went on to Fork Union and then went to College. This is a part of what inspired me to go to college. I wanted to be just like my big cousin. Since being locked up interrupted my football goals, I plan on going home and getting a trade in H.V.A.C



Rebekah

My biggest inspiration is my mother. She is my rock, and I draw my strength from her. My mom has made many sacrifices for my brothers and I. When we were younger, we lived in a not so great area and my mom didn't want us to live in that environment. She put our house up for sale, got a job transfer, and we moved. She wanted us to move to a better area with better schools for better opportunities in the future. This is one of the many selfless acts that she conducts. She always puts her children and everyone else first, with no questions asked. When I grow up, I

aspire to be just as generous and as giving as she is. My mom has raised me with the same West Indian values that she was raised with. I am now understanding more of who she is as I have gotten older. She is also an entrepreneur, but now that her children are older, she is back in college to further her education and receive her bachelors and masters degree. My mother is an admirable woman, who takes challenges head on, and makes them stand down. She will forever be my greatest inspiration.

“From this experience I’ve gained not only a new perspective, but a positive relationship with someone I would have otherwise never met.” - K. Stewart

Tell Me A Story About A Time You Felt Pain

Hannah

I walked down the stairs and felt my bare feet hit carpet, hardwood, and then finally the concrete of the backyard patio.

Sitting down on the cool steps, I felt the warm August dusk against my skin.

I hesitantly called my friend, and was somewhat relieved when his answering machine picked up, realizing I wasn't ready to voice my fears to anyone but myself.

That I was scared for my mom. Was death really possible? That I was worried about myself. What if the sadness I had fought so hard to push away came back?

Just an hour before, I had made the short walk between my neighbors house and my own.

It was a calm summer evening and would be getting dark soon.

I walked through our red front door and upstairs to where I could hear the tv.

As I sat down on the couch next to my parents, I recounted my night babysitting the kids who had lived across from us for years.

Conversation eased away, and the air seemed to turn still, filled with expectation and uneasiness.

"The doctor called," my mom said. "I have cancer."

She said it unwaveringly and without tears, forcing me to behave the same.

Amidst life carrying on as usual and the easiness of the day, I had somehow forgotten that my mom had found something foreign on her body just a week or so before.

Maybe I had convinced myself the phone would never ring and the news would never come.

Like we could escape from the ugliness of the world.
I listened to my parents describe what our lives would
be like: surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and finally a
long recovery.
I stayed silent, and then said “yes” when asked if I was
okay.
I wasn’t, but couldn’t get the words out.
Now I was alone in the backyard, and felt alone in the
world within the context of my experience.
Trying to make sense of the pain.
I looked around at all the things familiar to me.
The barbecue my dad cooked dinner on while Jack
Johnson floated out of the house. The firepit my
friends and I laughed around.
I felt as if my comfortable and safe life had been
compromised with no fault of my mom’s or my own.
Like the ugliness of the world had finally gotten the
best of me, despite how hard I had tried to hide.

Troy L.

After I left the courtroom to re-enter the holding cell,
I had forever to think over the past event.
During that time I just sat there not knowing really
how to deal with or even cope with the situation.
Being inside a cold small cell made the pain I felt
worse.
Especially because I was there thinking about every
event that led up to me being locked away from the
world.
Throughout my life I’ve felt tremendous amounts of
pain.
For example, being shot, stabbed, even car crashes.
But honestly my unbearable pain I felt was mentally.
Sitting in front of the judge and getting sentenced to
the time I’m doing now.
It isn’t as major as some peoples but when you have
priorities and people who love and care for you it’s
very hard to accept defeat.

So instead of accepting it I prevailed and became the best man I can be for my family and myself.

I figured if I did anything I wanted to do in the streets then I was considered a man.

But being here and going through this time will make any man second guess himself and his past actions.

So as I sit here everyday and go thru the same routine I'm still in pain. The only cure to this pain is to be released.

It hurts to go to sleep and dream of home and then wake up to 12 other inmates, or to sleep on a bed the size of a yoga mat instead of the California King that I have at home.

But what hurts the most of all is not being able to see my son grow up and teach him things only a man could.

*“Like Maya Angelou said...We are more alike my friend
than we are unlike.” - Mercedes*

Tell Me A Story About An Event That Changed You

Kayla

On the first night of my junior year of high school's winter break, my mom, dad and I went to our neighbor's house for a holiday party. My dad and I had just made up from a fight about soccer that we were in. We'd been fighting a lot in the months leading to the party. On top of work, I know this was a huge factor to his high stress level at the time. My sister was at her friend's house. I didn't really know anyone at the party, so I stayed with my parents. I don't know how long we were there for when my dad told my mom that he was going outside and she should come out when she got a chance. The casualness of his statement led my mom to take her time in a conversation she was having. Eventually, I started my own conversation with a girl there about college. Some time passed, and I realized that my mom was gone and neither she or my dad had returned. I excused myself from my conversation, and told the girl I would be back. I never went back that night. My parents weren't outside my neighbor's house. I walked home and rang my doorbell. No answer. I went through my garage. The car was gone. At that moment, I knew that something was wrong. I picked up the house phone and called my mom. She told me that she was driving my dad to the hospital, because he was having chest pain. He'd be fine. I asked if he had a heart attack. She said no, and hung up. Something didn't feel right. I paced around my house for what seemed like hours. I don't know how long. Time wouldn't pass. Seconds felt like minutes, minutes like hours. I couldn't breathe. Nothing could stop my heart from pounding. My dad's mom called me. I'd been crying. She asked if everything was okay.

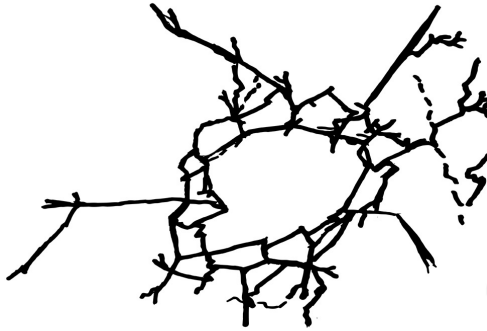
I knew my mom didn't tell her. But she can always tell when I'm upset. I lied. I told her everything was fine. I rushed her off the phone. That night, I also lied to my sister who was at her friend's house. She asked why mom and dad couldn't pick her up. I told her they went out. She asked where. I said I didn't know. I don't know if I lied because I wanted to protect my sister, honor my mom's wishes, or take the easy way out and not have to deal with facing the reality of the crisis I knew in my heart was happening. Later that night, my mom's parents picked Ashley up from her friend's house and brought her back home. Ashley was mad at me. She thought I lied to her, which I did. I just did what I was told. At this time, she would've hid it from me too. My nana and grandpa also treated the situation like it was nothing, probably in an effort to keep us calm. My dad was in the hospital for about a week before he was allowed to return home. One day at the hospital, a doctor walked into the room. He introduced himself as the doctor who saved my dad's life. He said that his heart attack was so bad that if he hadn't come in when he did, he wouldn't be alive.

After my dad's heart attack, it was a like a switch went off between my sister and me. After her initial anger at me for withholding my knowledge about the heart attack, Ashley and I bonded over our emotions regarding the incident. We spent most of the following days together. We would watch TV, sleep in the same bed, visit our dad, and catch up on our lives. I hate to say it, but I think we needed a major event to bring us together. As children, we were always competing for our parents' approval and trying to get under each other's skin; there was always an underlying animosity and pettiness between the two of us. After my dad's heart attack, however, this grudge faded away completely. Since then, my sister has become my greatest friend in the entire world. We tell each other everything and rely on each other for advice, encouragement, a laugh, or a shoulder to

cry on. I'm not grateful for my dad's heart attack in any way, but I'm grateful that as byproduct, my sister and I were brought so close together. I wouldn't trade our bond for anything.

Melvo

One night me and my home boyz was chillin at my house smokeing weed so we called up some girls. When they came they smoked with us for a bit long story short. One of the girls lost her phone then tryed to say my brother took it so we started going back and forth about it then i said fuck it i left went to the back with another girl we was layed up so a few mins after that we went back to the front. She was still going at it so i told her to go head



and bounce she got bucked with me so i called her a bitch and she ran up on me. Out of no where i just hit her she fell i started hitting her some more after that she left. So two weeks later i bucked on House arest and went to home comeing. Later that night i went to post out the hood next thing i know i get a call from my brother He telling me somebody shot up the House i go Home the house had Holes all in it. i started lauging went inside and layed down. after that my brothers went to my aunt House for like a week or

so my mama went to my daddy house. Me i was still trynna find out who did it. So one day i seen her walking and i asked her about it she told me get the fuck out her face..When i get out im gonna talk to Her about that day and how im sorry just Hope for the best.

*“I learned that I can learn something from anyone.” -
Troy V.*

Tell Me A Story About Your Inspirations

Jermaine

One person that inspires me is my grandmother. She inspires me because she is so strong and so positive. No matter how bad the problem or situation she's always being strong and thinking positive. That's one of the reasons I look up to her. She has raised me since I was five years old, I have been living with her my whole life. But before I moved in with her I was living with my Aunt because my grandmother was the hospital fighting breast cancer. She has beat the breast cancer and has been breast cancer free for a very long time now and that's another reason I believe she's so strong. When she comes to visit me here and we be talking, and if I drop my head for a split second she tell me

pick your head up aint noting down there but the devils. She has been on earth a very long time so she is always trying to give knowledge and wisdom. She's always trying to school me on life and trying to get me to see things from every angle. She is just like a mother to me, so I feel like I am blessed to have a mother and grandmother in one person. When I was younger and I was playing football she used to come to every game and bring me food and sodas, she used to come to all my practices with me and always encourage me on the field.

Rose

The person in my life who has inspired me the most is my grandmother, Judita Hruza. Her passion in life, as a survivor of the Holocaust, was to share her story with everyone she possibly could, not out of a longing for pity, but for a deep desire to teach young people about history from a first hand source. She would often say that for as long as she lived, she would not ever again take a single breath for granted and would make her life's mission to tell the stories of the Holocaust for the sake of those less fortunate than her, those who did not make it out alive. The stories she would tell me while I was growing up have stuck with me and I believe that they have made me into the person I am today. Her ability to turn tragedy and hardship into influence and success

was so, so incredible. She was somehow able to see the positive side of every situation. I distinctly remember, one morning, her cooking traditional czech cuisine and me watching from across the island. I was around eleven years old and after briefly being exposed to the events of WWII in history class at school, my mind was overwhelmed with questions for my grandmother. As I grew up, the stories I had heard when I was younger transformed from sugar-coated narratives to the actual truth of her hardships and experiences. Her strength during her early twenties, when coming face to face with pure evil, as well as her ability to turn that absolutely horrifying experience into an opportunity for self growth, is absolutely incredible. It would have been so easy for her to fall into a depression after

finding out that nine of
her closest relatives
had been killed by the
Nazis, but she was able
to find the strength

within herself to
achieve the
unimaginable for a
woman at that time.



I took away... “*meet[ing] new people*” - Naqwon

Tell Me A Story About A Time Things Changed

Jaquan

Change has played a huge role in my life. I have changed in order to find positive outcomes in life because being positive always brings the good out of you. Changing has been hard for me because I couldn't adjust to the lifestyle I was planning for myself. I have to change though for myself and the people that support me. The first time I thought about change I was in a group home. I was doing things like committing crimes, smoking marijuana, drinking, and skipping school. What this did was hold me back from the positive things I want to do in life, like becoming a merchant marine. In the group home, I thought about how my future could be better if I put forth more effort into turning my life in the right direction. I considered changing because I wasn't built to be incarcerated or somewhere worse, hurting my mother. When I was younger, everything was set out for me to do right by all means, but when I turned 14 I started hanging out with the wrong crowd and getting myself into trouble. From the age of 14 I was stealing cars and committing other crimes that caused me to be in and out of detention. While in detention, I had the chance to think about my future and I now realize I only want better for myself. That helped me plan my future and as time has passed, I have made improvements.

Mercedes

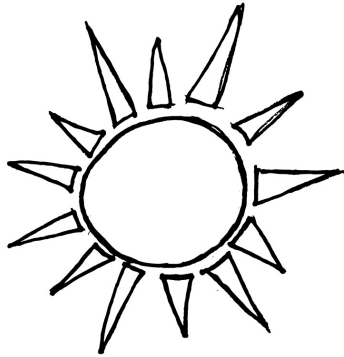
I guess you could say things are changing for me. You see, I couldn't get out of bed on Thursday. I couldn't look at myself in the mirror on Friday. And on Saturday, I had to go home. As my father pulled up to my dorm, I couldn't even look him in the eye. I felt

shame boiling inside of me, making my cheeks flare up and my forehead burn with disgust aimed solely at myself. I was ashamed of what was happening. I am 19 years old and in college. I have done everything in my life not to let my parents down but somehow this feels like a failure. My dad hopped out of the car, clearly unsure of the right thing to say. It was something I actually found endearing about him; the way his eyes close up and his lips get tense. This is how I know he cares. I hand him my two bags, filled because I do not know the length of my stay, and he hurls them into the back of the car without a single word spoken. Hopping into the passenger seat, I click my seatbelt and silently stare out the window. I don't want him to see the tear that slipped out of my left eye, unannounced and quietly. "Alright, let's head home." His voice is strong. I can't even pretend to be.

Just two short months ago my father told me how proud he was of the woman I was becoming. It feels as though that woman is a stranger, far removed from the one sitting next to him on the worn out seats of his Jeep Wrangler. The car ride home was long and difficult. A mix of John Denver, Bob Marley, and Elton John blasted through the car speakers as I tried to tune out all the noise in my head. What it truly ended up being was five hours of me sobbing, him asking me if I was okay or wanted to talk about it, and me proceeding to turn the speakers up. When we finally parked behind my mom's all-too-familiar blue Mazda, I turned to him and our eyes truly met for the first time. "I'm embarrassed," I spurted out like the last drop in a ketchup bottle. My father turned the car lights on and took off his glasses. He grabbed my shaking hands and said something I will never forget. "We love you and we are always here for you. You have nothing to be embarrassed about. Stay positive for me, Sunshine. Better days are coming." Sunshine, my nickname since childhood seemed ironic now. Branded now with my diagnosis, it seems as if I only

get glimpses of it. It peeks through curtains open for only half a second then dragged close so that you forget sunshine was even there to begin with.

Yet, my father still calls me Sunshine. He believes in me and wants me to stay positive. So, as I write this from my seat on the train making its way from Philadelphia to Richmond, I let the sun come through the window and beam onto this very page. I do this not because I like the glare or have any desire to squint at my writing. I do this because it reminds me that there is sunshine in everything. Perhaps there is sunshine still left in me.

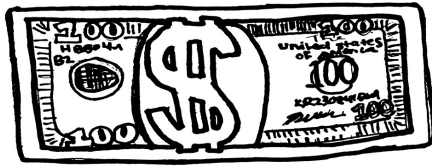


“Individuals who are incarcerated are often times extremely similar to us and we shouldn’t assume the worst from them. Everyone has a story.” - Rose

Tell Me A Story About A Time You Felt Trapped

Jaquazzi

It was a regular night and I happened to fall asleep. Halfway threw the night money began to fly across my eyes. I couldn't reach out and grab it nor smell it. When the morning came I had woken up on the bunk of the cell. Of course I was mad but still thinking too myself like when the judge let me free I have to learn how to invest money and have abundance of money. Till this day I talk too my peers and elders about how to earn money the legal way.



Bianca

During my freshman year of high school, there was a school shooting at a neighborhood school, Arapahoe High. It was only 15 minutes away from mine. When the shooting happened, the alarm blared and teachers yelled at us to sit in the gym against the wall and not make a sound. I felt completely trapped, not knowing what was going on and not being able to move. My peers looked back at me with worried eyes, not knowing if our lives were in danger. Eventually, they let us leave, and that's when I learned that a girl had been shot at Arapahoe. Looking back on that day, I feel even more trapped, for I realized that if I were ever in a similar situation, my classmates and I would be helpless. We would have no

way to defend ourselves, and no way to prevent it from happening again and again. However, I did find solace in the fact that my community had the ability to come together after this tragedy, for we had all shared the same terrifying experience. We found comfort in our shared sadness, and were able to support the students at Arapahoe in whatever way we could. While tragedies like the one at Arapahoe devastate communities, it gives me hope that people can come together afterwards and try to change the way the world works, one supportive message or protest at a time.

“Interacting is one way to make life easier.” - Jaquan

Tell a Story of a Difficult Time in Your Life

Naqwon

A difficult time in my life, got to be when alot of people started dying in my family. First my brother and uncle got killed the same day in Creighton Court Projects in Richmond Va. My mom used to snap on me everyday, because i was her only son now, but i never knew why she always use to yell. But now i know she didn't want me to fall victim to this street life end up getting killed like my brother and uncle. I did fall victim to the streets, but i was lucky not to end up getting killed. I got locked up at 16 years old, got sentence to 15 years with 10 years and 6 months suspended which leave my with 4 years and 6 months. But anyway my other uncle that i have my middle name after got shot in the hip like 2 months after my people died, he couldn't walk nomore they put him in a wheelchair. He started stressing and saying that he don't want to live nomore and that it's his fault my brother died because if they want mad at each other they would of been 2gather. So he started saying he wasn't going eat so my mommy and aunt's use to



force him to eat like we can't lose you to, he said he just wanted to be with his nephew. My grandpa and Grandma was post to change him everyday and they want so he got a infection in his body and died. At this time im smokin alot of weed so i can stay melo cuz it hurt alot when you lose the ones you love. Like two weeks after the funeral my Great Grandma died of age, that really had my whole family going crazy. That was the most difficult time in my life.

Megan

Staring down a glass bottle of hopes
drinking down the failed dreams
forgetting the detestable endings
that had promising beginnings
Thinking what I wanted, was what I needed
Another sip....
perceived as a distraction from the present
a momentarily cure from the past
liquid to fill the void
an escape from the pain
that coated, covered, smeared us in blue

The momentary fix from the distractions
was an illusion
pain doesn't leave just disappears
the blue that covered us
was a stain
from the agony that leaked from the heart
until we were all empty beings seeking hope
from bottles of broken glass
drowning in our desires
drunk in our lustorious wants
and above all screaming
for a way out of something
we thought we wanted

“We might be different but we have common stories.”
- Solomon

Tell a Story About Someone Who Influences You

A. King

My Bon Air roommate KD has influenced me a lot. We were already friends but not roommates when I got ants in my room. They said I couldn't stay in my room anymore because of the ants so I had to stay in KD room for 2 days. It was nighttime and I was high from my sleeping pills and KD asked me if i was hungry. I said I was so he asked what you want and I was like you act like you the whole store or something and he said I am the store and took out his big ass bin of food and gave me the chips and cookies I asked for. He gave me grandma cookies, but he dont get those anymore. I ate them and we talked about how peoples fake and they disguise it and you can't tell how they really feel. They will smile in your face but talk shit about you behind your back and try to fight. KD isn't like that though. He talked about how he wants me to stop catching charges cuz he said I'll be locked up and then I cant do shit. KD wants the best for me. He inspired me enough to want to go to college. That night KD wont let me sleep because we're talking. Usually I just go to sleep from my meds but he wont stop talking. He asked if I'm still hungry. I am. He gave me more grandma cookies and I ate them. We was still talking until 1 am about things like doing good and getting out, getting jobs and possibly living together when we out of here. He said he was getting tired and he laid down and went to sleep. I asked the people if we could be permanent roommates and they said yes cuz we help each other be the best we can be while inside. Even when we fight i know KD has my back.

K. Stewart

Growing up a twin meant a lot of things. It filled my childhood with exclamatory statements like, “No way, you guys are twins? You look nothing alike! You’re lying”, which almost always prompted in-depth quizzes about obscure family facts -- like our maternal grandma’s maiden name -- or demands to say our birthday on the count of three. Being a twin taught me the word telepathy when I was six, and no, Spencer and I are not telepathic. However, being a twin also gave me a built-in best friend since my first breath. Spencer has been the biggest, most influential person in my life, shaping me into the person I am today in ways no one else could have. Spencer’s always been the mature one, even if I’m two minutes older, always seeming to be one step ahead of me in life. It’s not a surprise if you’ve ever met him. Spencer is the tough one, firm in his beliefs, patient when it’s dictated, but will loudly stand up for what’s right when necessary. He can keep his head level when I feel like I’ll explode if I don’t argue my point until I’m blue in the face. He’s also incredibly brave, and the most likely to push those around him to try new things and explore the world. Once when we were in seventh-grade, only Spence and I were home, and so like any other hungry kid, we decided we *had* to make dinner ASAP. Both our parents were working late, and with no one else home, we landed on making baked potatoes for the two of us. It’s not complex or technically challenging, so Spencer left me in charge of peeling our potatoes while he showered. Of course, as the clumsy twin, I cut my finger on the peeler. Words cannot express the panic that ensued in the following minutes. Crying and screaming about stitches and amputation, I ran around our kitchen helplessly holding my finger until he ran down the stairs. Spencer acted in his typical fashion, coming to

my rescue and calming me down, sitting me down at the table and giving me first aid (which consisted of neosporin and a band aid), never once matching my level of hysteria. He kept me grounded that day, and has ever since. People always ask me what it's like being a twin, but I wonder what it's like to not be one.

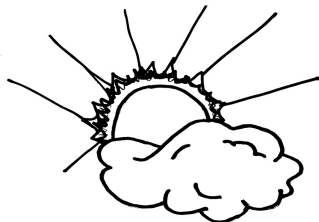
“I get to tell you about me, and that felt good.”
- Jaquazzi

Tell Me A Story About How Your Mind Works

John

Take Away My Pain

My mind is always going just like a train
If you really look in my face you can see my pain
People say my name like I'm they nigga but don't
never wanna stay in their own lane
If you fuck with me you know I don't want the fame
Cuz to be real I wanna our these haters to shame
If I don't I have just myself to blame
Man dis shit so fucked up, never seen myself locked in
chains
Prayin to God everyday I get a sunny day with no rain
To be real when I get sunny days people look at me
crazy cuz I'm still asking, "Do you feel the rain?"
I'm so washed up to da point where my spirit is oh so
plain
Been waiting so long for better days man now I need a
cane
It's like rain down go away I'm starting to think it's a
stain
But all is all, I just keep praying, God, "Can you take
away my pain"



Corbin

Who am I?

How do I take away your pain?
Who am I to erase your fears?
I have questions when I look in your eyes
Do you have to pay for your smile because you're in
debt to your tears?
Do you feel like you're drowning because you can't
escape from your fears?
I'm not sure how to make the rain go away
Walk on water, or make sure he answers when you
pray
But I can be here
I have no answers
But I can be here
I am flawed
But I can be here
It might hurt
But you're still here
You might have questions
But you're still here
It's not easy
But you're still here
You are my inspiration, so who am I to erase your
fears?

*“Connection is fuel for the heart, my heart is definitely
full now.” - Corbin*

Epilogue

Now that you have read our stories, we hope that you will share them with others. The beauty of storytelling is that it can be read by anyone, resonate with anyone, and be shared by anyone. What you have read today is the physical representation of our coming together, of our own *E Pluribus Unum*. The stories, quotes, and drawings have been created by different members of the group, yet work together to form this book. We may have started off as 32 strangers living 32 completely different lives, but taking the time to look past the surface and focus on the hidden text of our experiences has united us. Never again shall we be another anonymous penny to one another, but rather a fellow storyteller, peer, and most importantly, friend. We hope that this mindset inspires you to think past the bright copper surface and find the deeper validity in others. It's there...trust us. Everyone has a story just waiting to be told.

Reflecting on our time together, we asked ourselves what we thought about this project after sharing our stories and getting to know one another. We have included these quotes below:

Now I think...it was nice to meet new people and share stories with them. - Jermaine

Now I think...it is going to be hard to leave a new friend that I have made in this experience. - Eliz

Now I think...I can't imagine leaving Bon Air and not spending my Mondays here. It's weird to have made such a personal relationship and to just leave it. - K. Stewart

Now I think...that my partner and I are friends. Although there is a very good chance that we won't

see each other again, Troy and I have created a bond that I will always remember. - Amanda

Now I think...that I should have a more optimistic mindset and that there are things to learn from anyone. - Troy V.

Now I think...it was worth it. - Tim

Now I think...you don't really know a person until you talk to them. There is so much more to a person once you hear their story. - Kayla

*Now I think...I can share my story without people judging me.
I still think...That I can change. - Naqwon*

Now I think...this was a great experience and I wish it could've been longer. - Jaquan

Now I think...that people at jail need more respect and encouragement. I hope that society can give them more opportunities and understanding rather than prejudice. - Zhiyou

Now I think...We all have more similarities that we might initially expect. - Matt

Now I think... She made me more comfortable talking about my life. - Troy L.

Now I think... All stories are important and human connection comes easily if you are curious. - Hannah

We would like to thank Beverly Tackett, the Volunteer Coordinator at BAJCC, for guiding us through and for being extremely patient during this process. Thank you to Sylvia Gale and Miranda Rosenblum for leading us in this project, and also to the staff at Bon Air and the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement for supporting this project. A special thanks to our cover artist for his incredible drawing. Finally, thank you to our readers for taking the time to read something that is so meaningful to all 32 individuals who contributed to this book.

“There is always more to a person than what meets the eye or what you know from their situation.” - P. B.

