

Mend

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Mend - Complete Issue, v. 1

Mend Journal

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Journal: Mend - Complete Issue, v. 1



MEND

2023 | PROJECT MEND

MEND

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Mend is an online and print journal that celebrates the lives and creative work of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people as well as individuals who have been impacted directly or indirectly by the criminal justice system. This annual publication showcases writing of all types, including fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. While prospective authors may submit pieces that describe their experiences with incarceration, the publication welcomes contributions on any topic.

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The 2023 *Mend* Award for
Excellent Writing recognizes
Marvin Wade for "Getting Over
the Mountains."

Art on cover and left: Hannah Landon.



INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the first issue of *Mend*, an online and print journal devoted to celebrating the lives and creative works of justice-impacted people. This annual publication showcases writing of all types, including poetry, research reports, and creative nonfiction. *Mend* presents an array of topics ranging from imprisonment to reentry, trauma to recovery, and despair to hope.

This is not simply another publication about incarceration, reentry, or even the criminal justice system; it is a publication that recognizes the humanity of those impacted by mass incarceration. Our authors celebrate, explore, and interrogate various aspects of life. Some seek to provide a platform from which justice-impacted people's voices can be heard in hopes of stimulating conversations and, perhaps, advocacy. Others seek to interpret the world through writing that has nothing to do with prison.

Mend seeks to help reimagine who a returning citizen is and can be with access to requisite resources. It also takes into consideration the renegotiations that take place between families, communities, and societies. As a formerly incarcerated person and editor, I have had the pleasure of learning a variety of publishing-related skills from editing to page design. Having worked alongside Professor Patrick W. Berry, two Syracuse University students—Fátima Bings Martínez and Luke Hardy—and three other justice-involved colleagues—Karl Deans, Cherise Hunter Titus, and Troy White—I now possess a cursory understanding of what it takes to create a professional publication from start to finish.

Since November 2022, we have laughed, cried, celebrated and become a family in pursuit of creating something meaningful. The journey was not easy. We lost Cherise Hunter Titus, a member of our team, on Valentine's Day. She was a ray of sunshine who helped us reconsider some of the more empathetically inspiring creative works. Additionally, another member of our team could not continue due to health complications. With their spirits and initial contributions in mind, we have put together a compilation of creative works that will pull at heartstrings, ignite conversations, and address what it means to be human. But none of this could have been possible without the talented contributors who were absent yet in the room with us.

Mend is made possible through collaboration with the Center for Community Alternatives and HNY's Post-Incarceration Humanities Partnership, which is generously supported by the Mellon Foundation. Also, the project has been supported by the Engaged Humanities Network, the Humanities Center, and a CUSE Research Grant.

Special thanks to Benay Bubar for offering insight into copyediting, Wendy Mansfield for offering suggestions on layouts, and to the judges—Brice Nordquist, Johnny Page, Zakery R. Muñoz, and Michaela Thorley—who helped us select the winner of the award for best writing in this issue.

We want to thank the contributing authors and artists for making this inaugural issue so powerful.

—Brian T. Shaw

Layout by Brian T. Shaw. Art by Brian Hindson.



CONTRIBUTORS

Becky Brasfield is an advocate for recovery, disability rights, and legal system-impacted individuals. She received her bachelor's degree in psychology and her master's degree in sociology from the University of Illinois. Becky is a Certified Recovery Support Specialist and a Certified Psychiatric Rehabilitation Practitioner. She is currently the president of the Board of the NAMI Illinois Alliance of Peer Professionals. Becky is a Cook County Equity Cohort Fellow, an HSRI Behavioral Health Policy Fellow, and a member of Disability Lead, an organization for emerging leaders with disabilities. Becky believes that through a commitment to purpose, opportunities, and values, a person's life can be transformed.

Destany Beckwith has been incarcerated at Taconic Correctional Facility for the past six years. She is 23, from Schenectady NY, and in the process of working on an associate degree. She writes, "I would like to say thank you to my family and girlfriend for sticking by my side through thick and thin and believing in me when I couldn't believe in myself."

Michael Berg writes, "I'm a currently incarcerated man with shattered dreams and a minimum of 7 1/2 years left on a 20-to-life bid. I am utterly broken (and I'm coming to understand that I always have been), but with God's help, I am

healing, however slowly. I currently have only 3 goals in life: 1. Go home (whatever "home" means anymore); 2. Prepare to go home (information, knowledge, plans, etc.); and 3. Stay sane while doing the first two. Anything else is fluff."

Robert Ehrenberg is 64 years old and currently living in Queens County. He is a recent college graduate and holds an associate degree in humanities and a bachelor's degree in social science. He now dedicates his time to various avenues that promote higher education and criminal justice reform while giving back to the community.

Ivan Flores is a writer and poet seeking to inspire a world that needs to change in many ways. He writes, "I hope you can step up and do your part to help a cause. Pure hearts are needed to create!"

Theresa Fortner is a devoted mother and grandmother from the St. Louis area who enjoys gardening, exercising, and crafting galore. She is pursuing a liberal arts degree at Washington University. She is a Christian and a loyal Chiefs fan!

Justin Guyton is a native of Akron, OH, and an author, a music producer, and an entrepreneur. As the owner of Blowboi Entertainment, he has helped many other incarcerated individuals become

Art by Feimo Zhu.

published authors. His book *Felon: The New Slur Word - Revised Edition* highlights many of the injustices within the criminal justice system.

Kwaneta Harris is a perimenopausal criminalized survivor who has somehow managed to survive the infamous and deadly Texas triple-digit temperatures in a non-air-conditioned cell the size of a parking space in solitary confinement. A regrettably late-to-the-party feminist and a prison abolitionist, Harris is dedicated to unlearning beliefs that contribute to trauma.

Vicki Hicks is an incarcerated writer with Exchange for Change. She is a grandmother of four and a contributor to *Don't Shake the Spoon* and *Prisoner Express*.

Dr. Ray Legler is a community psychologist and an assistant professor in the Community Psychology Doctoral Program at National Louis University in Chicago. His professional interests focus on the needs of children and youth in cities. This includes experience with school-community partnerships, after-school programs, and education policy. His recent work has involved support for a community-based project designed to build connections between the education system, the business community, and others to support the transition from high school to post-secondary education or training for students living in low-income communities.

Gary A. Marez was born in 1980 in a small New Mexico town called Clovis. His family was very poor. He has three siblings, all younger, whom he loves dearly. He writes, "I have never had or known much of a life outside of incarceration. I was raised by the juvenile and adult prison systems and taught to believe that I would never amount to much other than what I am right now—inmate: #53090. Recently, writing has made me feel better about myself and see myself beyond this number. I hope my piece helps someone who also believes that their safe place is a cell understand that feeling safe isn't the same as being safe! Although I felt safe in prison, it turned out to be one of the most unsafe places of all. Please enjoy and remember to be safe."

Gary McCain is enrolled in Holy Cross's Moreau College Initiative (MCI) at Westville Correctional Facility, where he will soon complete his bachelor's degree with a dual concentration in humanities and social science. An aspiring author, McCain has had a few pieces of work published, including two poems and a short story.

Christopher Reece is a writer of poetry and plays from Kalamazoo, MI. Before choosing to become a criminal, Reece was a young kid who enjoyed being a deacon and a Boy Scout. He loved all sports, especially basketball. He is serving ten to thirty years at a Level 5 max prison.

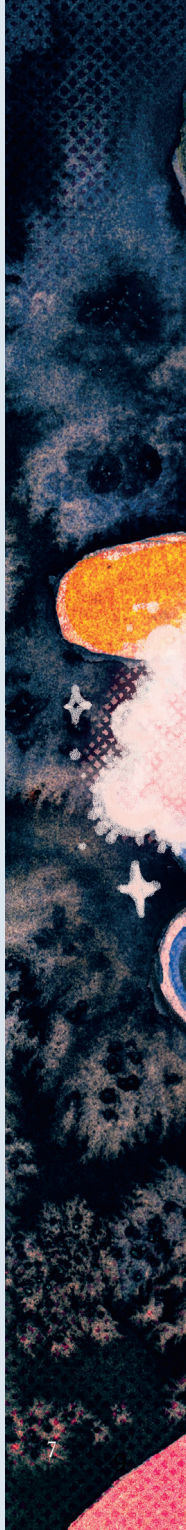
Jeffrey A. Shockley is a 60-year-old African American in the 23rd year of a life sentence being served in the state of Pennsylvania. He writes, "At the time, I was 37 years old when committing the heinous crime and strive daily to live this life in honor of those I have hurt."

Ronald Short is 73 years old. Sentenced to natural life in 1999 on his first incarceration, Short spent two years in Rikers Island and 11 years in Clinton Correctional Facility and is currently at Auburn Correctional Facility, where he has been for the past 11 years.

Basia Skudrzyk is workforce equity director at Prison to Professionals (P2P) and the director of the executive committee for the Education Development Center's STEM-OPS (STEM opportunities in prison settings) program. She is also the founder and CEO of World Wide Smart Beauty, a consulting company working with clients globally to enhance their brands and DEI footprints. Her accomplishments include more than 20 years of unlocking people's potential to advance in the world through education and workforce development. She is currently pursuing doctoral studies in business administration with a focus on supply chain risk and resilience at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. She partners with clients and organizations globally to reach, touch, and change the lives of people through mentoring, education, workforce development, advocacy, and policy change.

Dr. MoDena Stinnette works in social services. Her contributions have been a combination of lived experience, education, and professional development. Her current roles include social worker for the University of Illinois Chicago, project coordinator for the Northern Illinois Recovery Community Organization, and adjunct faculty member at National Louis University in Chicago, IL, and Dominican University in River Forest, IL.

Marvin Wade is a social and spiritual activist. Born in Brooklyn, NY, in 1970 to Dorothy Wade, a single mother of three, Marvin enjoys meditating, exercising, and spending time with family and friends. He is blessed with the gift of storytelling through the art of writing. After serving twenty-five years, he was released in 2019.





SECTION INTRO: VOICES OF SELF

Our voices and histories hold greatness and power. Within the pages of this section, we showcase powerful stories—voices of the self—that often go unheard.

As an editing collective, we are honored to present each writer’s moving contribution. By focusing on the self, we simultaneously celebrate and acknowledge the voices behind the written words. These authors frame their realities, worlds, families, and experiences. Their stories illustrate the importance of perseverance, the triumph of the human spirit, the importance of forgiveness, and the beauty and power of dreaming in a chaotic world.

In my twenty-one years, I’ve experienced the hardships of being a living self, but like these empowered authors, I’ve also reached for and held on to my own voice for guidance—and sometime escape. The writers in this section were brave enough to share their personal moments, deepest regrets, and raw experiences to a group of strangers to make their “voices of self” heard. They demonstrate the power of speaking about what the mind and body hold and encourage us to use writing as a mode for transformation.

Some of these narratives grapple with faith. Robert Ehrenberg’s poem “I Can Dream...” suggests the importance of maintaining hope and dreams in a world that can appear to have fallen asleep in a dark and toxic slumber. In “Blessings in the Battle,” Theresa Fortner provides insight into how one battles cancer while being imprisoned. Her empowering story shows how sometimes hardships can lead to unbreakable bonds.

Other authors take a more introspective stance. In “Hole Hearted,” Christopher Reece explores how every individual has an inherent emptiness or longing within their heart that seeks to be fulfilled. Ivan Flores takes this a step further in his humorous poem “God’s Hotline” by encouraging us to be self-reliant and independent despite our hardships. And in “Timeless Regrets,” Jeffrey A. Shockley draws on the genre of a letter to his daughter to reflect on his life and the circumstances leading him to prison. In the piece, written at 2:37 a.m., the sleepless Shockley confronts “Hope ever erased by timeless regrets.”

In “Freedom,” Destany Beckwith” captures the anxiety bottled within a person deprived of freedom while also embracing the strength it takes to fight for it. In Cherise Hunter Titus’ posthumously published piece, “Working for Education,” we see freedom of a different sort. Titus takes us on her journey through life as she pursues an education. She reminds us of the potential that education holds across generations. We will forever be grateful for her kind words and contributions.

The section closes with “Do Not Speak,” in which Basia Skudrzyk reminds us that difficult times can reveal our true strength and resilience. Her poem suggests that in times of despair, perseverance and endurance can lead to clarity and meaning.

All of these writers remind us that listening to oneself can lead to forgiveness and transformation.

—Fátima Bings Martínez

Photo by Nathan Martins from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/silhouette-of-face-and-hand-catching-light-in-darkness-16704461>.

I Can Dream...

Robert Ehrenberg



I can dream of a world that lives in peace
As I win the battle that ends all wars.
I can walk on a path that leads to righteousness
As I pray in a church that embraces redemption.
I can swim in an ocean filled with brotherhood
As I rid the world of waves of racial injustice.
I can travel through a land that accepts us all
Where prejudice and pain will roam no more.
I can feed all the children with pangs of hunger
When they are starved and long for something to eat.
I can house all the homeless people
Who are stranded alone down on Desolation Street.
I can bask in a sunshine that glows with strength
With people who are warmed by the rays of freedom.
I can create a place where we can live as one
In which I solve the problems of this troubled world.
Only when I give these gifts of life's greatest treasures
Can I sit back and watch people celebrate life.
I can dream...
Of a better place.
Or...
I can wake up in this world
That has fallen asleep.

Blessings in the Battle

Theresa Fortner

I'm sitting in a cold, drab prison exam room alone, without family by my side. They are not allowed to be here to comfort me while I await the results of a recent breast biopsy. I'm engulfed by anxious fear as my heart beats uncontrollably. My eyes focus on the expressionless nurse practitioner seated in front of me, and every second of the clock's ticking is amplified, resounding like ringing church bells. Tense silence consumes the room.

"Well," says the nurse practitioner, nonchalantly and routinely, "you have cancer."

I sit motionless while tears fill my eyes. She then informs me that the doctor will call me back in a week or two to discuss what happens next. I walk in a trance toward my housing unit; the sidewalk seems endless.

Isolated as I am in my confinement of solitude and aloneness, sleep evades me. A million terrifying thoughts swarm my worried mind: How can I possibly share this devastating news with my children? I'm drifting off, wondering if I'll ever hold my sweet, precious children or grandchildren tightly in

my arms again. I'm not even allowed to hug them for more than a brief moment during our visits; embracing for more than a few seconds will result in my being cuffed up and escorted to the hole, solitary confinement. The rules are strict and heartless.

I eventually muster up enough courage to share the news with my children; however, it has to be shared over the telephone within a 15-minute time restriction. I want to sound brave, but I'm not. I'm determined not to cry, but after our initial hello, they can hear in my voice that something is wrong. I break down, unable to hold back the tears. I share with my sweet children that I've just been diagnosed with breast cancer. They begin to comfort me through their own tears, assuring me that everything will be all right and that we will get through this together. They remind me that I am strong. For them, I must be strong. They continue to comfort me, but I hear the fear in their sweet strength. After all, I am their mother.

Weeks pass, and in my mind the cancer is spreading by the minute. The nurse told me



Layout by Brian T. Shaw. Photo by SHVETS production: CC, <https://www.pexels.com/photo/wisiful-bald-woman-in-robe-embracing-self-in-studio-6984593>.

it was a rare and aggressive type of breast cancer. Finally, I see the on-site doctor and my treatment plan is revealed, bringing some small comfort. I now need information about cancer to educate myself, ease my fears, and equip me for this battle that lies ahead. I don't have the luxury of looking information up on the Internet or attending a cancer support group. Desperate for information the medical staff refuses to provide, I reach out to my people—inmates behind these walls. My news, like any news here, spreads like wildfire, and within only a day, hope and encouragement comes. It comes from one cancer survivor and then another and another, each sharing their own brave story of their cancer journey behind these walls. These amazing women equip me with information about and insight into what my rights are as a human being. These secret insights are invaluable, and I now know that I have a say in what treatment I receive! I'm empowered and now a member of a unique prison sisterhood, no longer alone in this fight, yet the journey itself is a lonely one.

Three long agonizing months later, my appointments begin. I'm called to be transported, and when I arrive at the main intake/ departing area, I'm taken to a room and instructed to undress, then strip-searched as I stand in front of a perfect stranger, naked and exposed, violated in every way possible. Next, I'm given bright orange clothes to put on—they make sure I will stand out loudly around others outside these walls. I'm handcuffed, left over right, and then comes the big bulky silver chain being wrapped around my waist and secured in the black box, ensuring that my hands remain restrained. The shackles are next, and my ankles are now restrained as well. I'm fastened in the backseat of an unmarked vehicle and handed a sack lunch.

The two-hour road trip begins. I'm excited to be out yet nervous about what lies ahead. I am free—free from the confines of the prison gates—and it feels magical. I'm physically alone, but this aloneness is somehow different: God is with me, present. It's early morning, and I look out the window at the sunrise. It's magnificent, and the colors

are breathtaking: blues, purples, yellows, oranges, pinks. I feel a closeness to my Creator, and I begin to talk to God in my thoughts. I thank Him for the beauty of nature, which is a gift to me at this moment.

We arrive at the hospital, where I am placed in a wheelchair and escorted into the basement. A white blanket is draped over my body to hide the hardware I'm encased in from people who fear my very presence. The guards are in the exam room with me as my surgeon enters to discuss my medical condition. This doctor gently asks me to undress for examination with no privacy from the officers, my body exposed with no choice but to endure this humiliating experience.

Following the exam, I get dressed. I inform the doctor that the prison medical staff hasn't provided me with any information and plead for information about my diagnosis and treatments. I'm elated as the doctor shows immense compassion, sitting with me for over an hour, answering my questions, and printing out information. I learn that I (not the prison medical staff) am in control of what treatments and procedures I receive. I return to the prison strengthened, empowered, and equipped with information.

Months pass as I agonizingly wait for my surgery and treatments to begin. Why this indignity of waiting? It's the red tape of our medical department and the DOC. Finally, seven months after my diagnosis, I leave for surgery. The same routine: dress out, handcuffs, shackles, guarded escorts, and we're on the road. We arrive at the hospital, and I'm escorted through the basement into a private waiting room. Next I'm being prepped for surgery while handcuffed to the bed like a wild animal. The guards don't take their eyes

off me, and they're informed by the surgeon that they are not allowed in the operating room during surgery. I'm relieved. Later, when I'm in the recovery room flanked by the two guards, the surgeon shares the great news: the tumor was removed, and the cancer hadn't spread to my lymph nodes. I'm relieved now knowing I will not die in this hellish dungeon called prison. Upon my return to the prison, I slip into my comfy clothes and quickly fall asleep.

The next day, I venture outside to enjoy the nice weather. I pray as I walk the track, silently carrying on a conversation with God when He brings to my mind a scripture from Proverbs 31:25: "She is clothed with strength and dignity and laughs without fear of the future." I feel a spiritual peace and comfort knowing that God is with me and everything will be all right.

The chemo treatments begin. I don't know what to expect, but I am scared. I have no idea of the hellish torment that awaits me in the coming months. As I'm transported to the cancer center for my first of sixteen chemo treatments, I'm taken in through the basement to a private room that contains a hospital chair, an IV unit, a TV, and two chairs for the guards who never leave my side. The indignity hits me when I'm not allowed into the adjacent room where all the other patients are receiving their chemo treatments. I can see a table with snacks and drinks I'm not allowed to partake in. I am an outcast. The treatment lasts a few hours, after which I'm re-encased in my hardware of handcuffs and the infamous black box and transported back to the prison. The prison nurse informs me that I'll be scheduled for appointments over the

next seven days and given a shot to mask the ferocious side effects of the chemo drugs. Then I'm released back to my unit, where I return to my room and quickly go to sleep. Yet sleep in prison is not the same as sleep outside these walls. Over the next two weeks I experience weakness, nausea, pain in my eyes, and loss of appetite, and I sleep more than usual. But what is to come I could never be fully prepared for.

Friday, September 8, 2017, I am subjected to my second chemo treatment, which unleashes physical and mental torment on me. While the nurse advised me that I would start losing my hair after the second chemo treatment, nothing could have ever prepared me for the emotional trauma I experience when it happens. I will later remember September 10, 2017, as if it were yesterday; that is the day I start losing my beautiful blonde hair. My hair begins coming out by the handful while I am blow-drying it. I drop to my knees on the cold bathroom floor and cry uncontrollably. My roommate comes in, kneels beside me, and, without saying a word, allows me to grieve.

Later that afternoon, a beautiful event takes place without my even knowing. My friend, Candace, rallies a few inmates from the cosmetology school and tells them about my hair loss. I am immediately squeezed in for an appointment and my friend Veronica begins to shave the final remnants of my hair with empathy, watching me cry as the bald-headed woman in the mirror looks back at me. When I arrive back at my housing unit, the sisterhood of those deemed misfits and outcasts by society with whom I live tells me I am beautiful and helps me more than they will ever know to embrace this new change.

I now accept that THIS BALD-HEADED WOMAN GOING THROUGH CHEMO TREATMENTS is who I am. It's a part of my story, a chapter of my life, and I am a warrior princess.

The following months present many different challenges, including excruciatingly painful sores in my mouth that make it unbearable to eat or talk, painful neuropathy in my feet and hands, extreme weakness, nausea, anxiety, and midnight walks to medical in three feet of snow. Yet amid the battle there are so many wonderful blessings sprinkled throughout my journey.

Once my treatments are completed, the women who live on my wing ask me if I got to "ring the bell," signifying that I completed my final chemo treatment. I sadly share that I did not get to do that. Secretly they create a bell by hanging string from pencils and then from the strings hanging empty soda cans with their tabs inside. The next morning, they gather and call me out and tell me to ring my bell! The entire room is filled with women clapping, crying, and cheering as I do just that: I ring my bell! I am so deeply touched that these women with whom I am doing time have demonstrated love to me in such a tangible way.

I now know what it feels like:
To hear my name and "cancer" in the same sentence.
To wait an agonizingly long time for test results.
To struggle over treatment decisions.
To watch toxic chemo drip into my veins.
To wonder if I'll see my children again.
To wonder if I'll get to watch my grandchildren grow up.
To have hope.



HOLE HEARTED

CHRISTOPHER REECE

Every heart has a vacancy—
a void desiring to be filled—
searching for those verses—
with every melodic beat there's purpose—
warm blood on chill—
wholehearted when healed—
but there's a vacancy in every heart
that can never be filled.

Layout by Troy White.
Photo by Tony Frost from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/hands-of-a-man-and-a-woman-reaching-toward-each-other-12750482>.

GOD'S HOTLINE

IVAN FLORES

If God were to speak to you,
He would tell you things you already know.

For you already have all the answers deep within you.

He has more important things to worry about and to deal with
Than to listen to your whining and complaints,
Your so-called misery!

You're in pain!
I'm in pain!
We are all in pain!

A word of advice—

If your head is broken, call a head doctor.
If your heart is in pieces, buy some glue.

But please, whatever you do,
Do not keep jamming God's Hotline!
Cause my prayers won't make it through!

Timeless Regrets

JEFFREY A. SHOCKLEY



December 20, 2022

Good morning. It is 2:37 a.m.

Again, I find myself unable to sleep. Awakened out of a restless slumber, with my mind racing like an inexperienced driver new to the Daytona 500. Navigating through reflections on my past, which remains ever present in the (prison) time I am doing today.

My timeless regrets.

In prison this hour is when one may find some solace, peace even, because the normal boisterousness of life within is at its quietest. No inmates in the dayroom sitting around the stainless steel tables with matching seats welded to the table base.

Adult men, mostly seniors now, with a few younger prisoners mixed in, give instruction on how to pass the time without losing your mind: playing cards, chess, or dominoes and carrying on, among other things. There has been a recent increase in prices through a method called shrinkflation. The product sizes have gotten smaller, but the prices go up.

Some loud laughter comes from a few guys sitting on steel stools bolted to the floor, each in front of one of the nine numbered telephones hanging on the wall. They're talking to loved ones while blocking out the anchorperson from one of the local news and sports stations bellowing from the 27-inch wall-mounted televisions no one is watching.

Tossing and turning, I lie awake, holding back tears arising from the pain. A life suffered through as the hour draws near when the machine of correction and rehabilitation will begin to rise again, listening as the population begins to stir and awaken again, as if it were the movie *Groundhog Day*.

In this, will I find myself distracted from personal thoughts?

I'm determined to be strong while I try to remain ready to help anyone who may ask. I do not want my chaos to detract from another's experience or hope. Is it not my duty to give back?

Am I the only one who over time has

longed for or wished for a different childhood? Fought through things done or not done? Longed for different life outcomes that could have changed my trajectory so I would not have ended up where I am?

Holding only myself accountable for the choices and decisions made along this journey.

However...sometimes, like now, I wonder, What if...?

Hope ever erased by timeless regrets.

Life happenings I'm still too ashamed of or embarrassed to mention. Being older, I question why things happened in my life.

My mother gave me to my grandmother at such a young age. I traveled from pillar to post, like a host in the lives of those I claimed to love, but I was not present at the times when it mattered the most. Missing the developmental years and adult lives of my children, not sharing my life with my siblings because the five of us were raised separately. On weekends I would go to Philadelphia to visit, or they would come to Grandma's house in the suburbs for a visit, often because the adults had been fighting violently again.

With the many good things that have been done with my life, in my life, how could it be that here I now reside, afraid of a future that is still uncertain, haunted by a past that is no more? I write to stay alive, which gives me a new fear of rejection. What if they don't like me?

Wanting to escape into sleep, I lie here in this makeshift coffin called my bed in the wee hours, wrestling with timeless regrets.

Who am I to feel this way? My daughter, I love you.



Freedom

Destany Beckwith

I have waited a long time for freedom,
I'm still waiting today,
Sun rises, sun sets, and that's another day.
I toss and I turn, dreaming of fresh air,
The three walls suffocating me, but my day's almost here.
2,190 days, oh how long it's been,
Everything has changed and I'm still stuck in what used to be.
I can't wait to see the world and family that is waiting for me,
I try to keep busy but as the day nears I grow more anxious.
Thoughts roam my head of how everything will be,
What I will wear, also what I will eat.
Where I will go, and how I'll follow my dreams,
Nervous, that I am, so much so,
But I know myself, and I'm no longer a caterpillar;
I'm a butterfly that's had time to grow.

Layout by Troy White. Photo by Jill Wellington from Pexels:
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/silhouette-photo-of-woman-against-golden-hour-39853>.

Working for Education

Cherise Hunter Titus



It was the 24th of June 1992, my graduation day. I was twenty, pregnant, and walking across the stage to accept my high school diploma. My mom had never graduated from high school, having left at sixteen to have me. My father hadn't finished, either. I was happy to be standing there.

Six months later, I had Sincere, my first daughter. I did not know how to raise a kid, so I took parenting classes. When she was three, I was told to take her to PEACE, Inc. Sumner Head Start, where I met Julius Lawrence, who became my parent advocate. While Sincere was in school, Mr. Lawrence enrolled me into a PEACE, Inc. parenting program, where parents were given helpful hints and taught life skills in addition to being recruited to work for PEACE, Inc.

When Sincere graduated pre-K at five years old, I graduated from the PEACE program and began working there as a teacher's aide. By then I had already had my second baby, Keyonta, who was turning three and attending Head Start. In 1997, at the age of twenty-eight, I had my last daughter, Teanoa. I had three children and was making about \$10,000 a year. I was still on public assistance (PA), but life was good. I was budgeting and making sure my kids were dressed and fed, but something was bothering me. I wanted more for myself.

My head teacher at PEACE, Inc. told me she wanted me to sign up for some college classes at Head Start. I was unsure but ended up taking classes in the evening. I was like, *OMG!* It scared me, but this idea felt good. I worked during the day and went to school in the evenings after dropping my daughters off at home with their father. Life was changing before my eyes and I didn't even know it.

By now it was 2000 and my youngest daughter was getting ready to go to kindergarten. All three of my kids were in school, and I no longer had to worry about paying for a sitter. I could work while they were in school and considered finishing up my college degree, but I was in a tricky situation. Though I wanted to work to make extra money, I had to dance around the rules of public assistance. PA doesn't like recipients of assistance to work. So I had to figure out a way to either get around PA or put myself in a position not to need it anymore. To help figure things out, I visited and talked with my instructor at PEACE, Inc. He shared with me that because I had a learning disability the Office of Vocational & Educational Services for Individuals With Disabilities (VESID) could help me. I later learned that the program helps connect those who are learning disabled with tutors who can help them read at school, among other things. Excited to get some help and accomplish my goals, I went to VESID during my lunch break.

As I sat there, my name was called and I met a man who appeared to be not only partially blind but also reading Braille. He had my folder in his hands and began to tell me that there was no reason for me to be there. I started thinking to myself, *I don't even know how he got this far.* I just looked at him with a strained face. What I said aloud was, "Excuse me, sir, but who are you to tell me about myself and what I may or may not need?" Already feeling let down despite my initial excitement, I said, "You take that file and shove it up where the sun don't shine and the moon don't glow." He had ignited a fire within me. Leaving him no room to respond, I ran out of there crying. Everything had

happened so fast. It was 12:58 p.m. when my coworker picked me up. I was crying my eyes out when I got into her car, and she asked me what had happened. I told her that man had no right to tell me what I could or could not do because of my learning disability. He had no understanding of how I had gotten to where I was in life. His insensitivity to my story hurt me. It made me mad, but it also made me eager and more determined to grow without the program's help.

When I went back, I told my instructor that I wasn't going to get help from VESID. My instructor had already learned about everything that had happened from my coworker, which was good because I wasn't able to speak about it without rage. With my dyslexia, I never had the vocabulary to express myself properly. I didn't have ten- or twenty-dollar words to put things in a way that others might. I was glad my coworker had done so, and I was even more moved by my instructor's anger about how I had been handled. She was like, "Why would someone say or do that?" Her reaction fueled me in not giving up. In addition to expressing her frustration, she wrote VESID a not-so-nice letter.

In the meantime, I stayed with PEACE, Inc. and worked as best as I could until I left the company in 1999. Thereafter, I had a few jobs here and there. I worked at two locations for the Salvation Army as a head teacher, which allowed me to take courses in the evening, one of which was on University Avenue. This was good because I was able to work near my home and my daughters' school. Often enough they would come to where I worked after classes.

With my having accomplished a lot in life, my daughters now look up to me in so many

ways. Aside from instilling in them a strong work ethic given all the jobs I've had, I make it my duty to always let them know their worth. I still wanted to get my college degree, and I was inspired even more by a conversation I had with my daughter Sincere. After I told her that I wanted to go back to school one day, she said, "Well, go back to school, then, Mom." So, in 2010, at thirty-eight, I went to Bryant & Stratton College. I'd always said that I would never go to college again, being fearful of the application process, but I got over my fear through certain practices I learned from a pre-college course: time management, scheduling, and the importance of being consistent and not falling behind. The resources I had access to through the college were amazing and helpful.

While going to school I also had to deal with other things: I worked two jobs and took care of my kids, all the while dealing with an abusive relationship. Though my home life was a mess, at school I was blossoming. I became the president of the Criminal Justice Club, I helped out in the library, and I learned how to manage my class schedule. I would see my tutors and advocate for other students. I also learned to advocate for myself. Despite my doing well at school, my home life seemed to be falling apart in many ways.

As I previously mentioned, my mother and father had not graduated from high school. I did not have their support, much less their help, while I was attempting to acquire my degree. Things seemed to take a turn for the worse when I was a semester shy of finishing. One day my mom called me to say that my daughter Sincere had gotten arrested. My mother criticized me for

not being more involved and implied that I was not doing a very good job of taking care of my household. She blamed me for my daughter's arrest and even went so far as to suggest that I drop out of school, even though I had a 3.0 GPA. In response, I cried for three days. My other two daughters supported me. My kids knew the importance of my schooling and how it might improve our lives, especially since I had gotten off PA. Being able to get off PA was, and remains, a big, big thing. So, reminding myself of my daughter's insistence that I finish school, I buckled down and did what I could to be a better mother as well as to complete my degree. My children always spoke the truth. To encourage me further, Sincere called my mother and pleaded with her not to say hurtful things to me ever again. It was a difficult situation all around with my mother not being understanding. Although it hurt to have to deal with my mother's refusal to see what I was trying to do for my family, I pushed on.

To help get a better understanding or view of things, I talked with my advisor and was encouraged to keep on doing what I was doing. He reminded me of how well I had served as an advocate for myself and others, as well as of how others valued me. I remember that on occasion when I couldn't walk to work or to school, my coworkers and classmates would pick me up. There was a time when I came to the aid of a classmate, Scotty, my vice president, who had been dealing with personal matters. He was absent for a few days, so I went to my advisor and asked for Scotty's address. After class I immediately got in a cab—there were no Ubers back then—and went to his house. Scotty's wife answered and I told her I was there to speak

with him. This shows that I was persistent in caring for a friend who had been there for me and whom I didn't want to see fail. This also shows the breadth of my blood and adopted family, which is mixed and loving.

Two months later, on April 26, 2013, I graduated from Bryant & Stratton with a 3.8 GPA. I had the pleasure of having my mom, my boyfriend (who's now my husband), my children, and my granddaughter there. I set the tone this time around by walking the stage not only for myself but also, more importantly, for my daughters and my granddaughter. I became living proof that they, too, could graduate from college. I became the first in my immediate family to obtain a college degree, despite my learning disability. I went to college and achieved a degree in criminal justice. My mom told me she was proud of me. My kids hugged me, and those hugs alone made me feel like I was on the "moms dean's list." To myself I was like, "Oh, so this is what we're doing now." My sisters all expressed how proud of me they were. I couldn't help feeling appreciative of all the people who had helped me believe in myself. Now I stand as a testament that a lack of education should not define one's ability to achieve happiness. I'm currently working as a recovery Outreach Coordinator in the second bracket. I no longer make \$10,000 a year, nor am I on public assistance. But I have not forgotten where I came from and what others still deal with. I want people to know that it's just a matter of time before you shine. If I see you, I'm going to make you aware of the light that's in you.

My name is Cherise Hunter Titus, and life is what we make it. Don't give up! We all fall down, but it's what we do when we get back up that counts.



Do Not Speak

Basia Skudrzyk

Do Not Speak, You Have No Voice
Do Not Speak, You Have No Choice
Do Not Speak, For the Ground Has Been Removed From Your Feet
Do Not Speak, the Unjust Only Care About Your Defeat.

I Will Speak, I Have a Voice
I Will Speak, I Need to Create a Choice
I Will Speak, For My New World Has Allowed Me to Fly
I Am a Human, Who Cares and Wants to Live Not by Standby.

It's in Difficult Times That We See More Clearly
It's in Difficult Times We Persevere and Endure and Feel Pain Dearly
We Can Get Through What We Feel in Times of Despair
It Takes All of Us to Make Life Meaningful and Fair.

Man's Search for Meaning...
Seems Like We Are All Dreaming
What is Reality of Pain?
Is It Really a Loss or Gain?

I am Just One of 70 Million in This Current State
Wouldn't It Be Nice to Safely Debate?
Do Not Speak, A Phrase Heard Quite Often
A Phrase, if Altered, Could Restore the Fallen.

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SECTION INTRO: UNCOMMON KNOWLEDGE

The public knows little about what goes on inside prison. When you don't hear from loved ones behind bars, the lack of knowledge about what's going on can be frightening.

When I entered the Department of Corrections in 1975, it was mandatory that inmates contact their relatives at least once every two weeks. The Department of Corrections even provided pencil and paper. If relatives called and complained that they hadn't heard from their loved one, the inmate would be reprimanded by the facility.

While we welcomed the push to connect, a lot couldn't be said. The abuses in prison were extreme; the environment was racist, hostile, depressing, and violent. Yet too often, such conditions remained hidden.

This past May, Alysia Santo, Joseph Neff, and Tom Meagher reported in the *New York*

Times on “more than 5,600 records of disciplinary cases against prison employees, for issues ranging from physical abuse of prisoners to sleeping on the job.” These records were initially kept from the public, and much of the pain experienced in prison were wounds that no one really knew or understood.

And though I have many scars, I'm glad I made it through one of the most difficult periods of my life. My experiences in prison stay with me, representing stories that are too often unspoken.

The writers in this section are also dealing with untold truths. Some accounts concern life inside prison, while others are personal reflections that extend beyond bars. Still others are realities we are taught not to see, to brush under the rug. These authors work to shed light on uncommon knowledge in hopes of making their accounts

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<https://www.pexels.com/photo/black-and-grey-metal-patterns-2387533>.

seen and understood.

In “Reentry Works,” Becky Brasfield reflects on building a life and finding work after being imprisoned. She reminds readers that their criminal records are not their resumé’s, offering strategies for persevering and moving forward. Kwaneta Harris, in “Harmful Health Care,” exposes the health crisis in prison, revealing the brutality that goes on in a women’s correctional facility. She emphasizes the importance of advocating for human rights inside prisons. And in “Refuse to Succumb,” Justin Guyton offers a heart-breaking and powerful account of the cruel truth of solitary confinement.

But this uncommon knowledge does not only exist behind bars. In “A Small Look at the Return Home from Correctional Control,” MoDena Stinnette and Ray Legler provide jolting research into the limited resources

available upon release and how this support is tied to one’s home state.

Last, in “Requiem for the Shadow People,” Michael Berg presents a moving expression of the frustration and grief he felt over the treatment of inmates and their lack of recognition and dignity in death. Berg, like the other authors, seeks to raise awareness of the neglect and dehumanization experienced by inmates, urging empathy and compassion toward all individuals, regardless of their circumstances.

—Troy White with Fátima Bings
Martínez and Carly Cernek

Works Cited

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REENTRY WORKS

BECKY BRASFIELD

TOP TEN REASONS WHY YOUR
RECORD IS LIKE YOUR RESUME—
AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

Layout by Brian T. Shaw.
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An anyone with a criminal record knows like few others do what it's like to have a non-sealed/non-expunged criminal record. It's like having your sentence carry on while you're in the community; it's like having a lessened probation or parole constantly lingering over your head; it's like having your case continue as a "permanent punishment," up for review and discussion, any time you seek to advance in life. Until we are able to obtain legislative relief to mediate this unending barrier to reintegration in society, we learn the best we can not only to cope with our criminal records, but to turn them into something that can propel us forward. Nothing is truer than this when it comes to criminal records, employment, and reentry.

Those who have survived the criminal justice system, such as I, have to face a current and cruel reality—that society treats our criminal records a lot like our résumés. Is it true? Let's examine the similarities between our criminal records and our résumés in the pursuit of employment in today's society:

1. Your criminal record and your résumé are submitted with most if not all of your job applications.
2. Your criminal record and your résumé provide information to your employer about your past.
3. Your criminal record and your résumé give an impression of you that's difficult, but not impossible, to change.
4. Your criminal record and your résumé are in writing and in an electronic format.
5. Your criminal record and your résumé can make or break a hiring decision.
6. Your criminal record and your résumé can be discussed in more depth during an interview.
7. You can lie about your criminal record and you can lie on your résumé, but the truth will eventually come out.
8. Your criminal record and your résumé are often used

by employers to predict your future behavior.

9. Your criminal record and your résumé can be both public or private information.

10. Your criminal record and your résumé are only one part of the application process and can be very important or not important at all depending on your other qualifications.

If you are a person impacted by the criminal legal system, you are resilient, strong, capable, and worthy of a fair chance to embark successfully upon the rest of your life with hope and support. Don't let a difficult situation break you. Knowing and accepting the current reality of employment practices actually empowers us to transform our experience. This is how we can overcome our records and make the employment process work for us.

HOW TO OVERCOME YOUR RECORD

Build Relationships

Networking and meeting people, in person if possible, can undo the negativity of a criminal record. Work on developing positive impressions and you will build up your “positive record,” which can and will overcome the record of your past, leading to references and employment opportunities.

Focus on Positive Change

Highlight all the good things you have done in your past in your résumé and cover letter. When you discuss your criminal record, point to the difference between your past behavior and your present behavior. State in writing that you are available to discuss the circumstances surrounding your criminal record in an interview. Human Resources (HR) departments are used to this response. If they specifically ask for a statement in writing, ask someone in reentry to read it

before you submit it to HR. Whenever you have to discuss negative information about your criminal record, don't blame your case on the lawyer or the judge or the situation—simply point to the differences between your past predicament and your current good circumstances while highlighting your qualifications for the position. Having a positive attitude of reentry and empowerment will create better outcomes.

Integrity Works

Make it a personal habit to be honest. This builds integrity and trust. Whatever you do, don't lie about your criminal record or your résumé, because the truth will eventually come out. Employers will respect you for taking responsibility for the past and telling your truth but will rarely forgive your lying about it in the application process (because that means they can't trust you). Remember, your criminal record is only one part of the application and can be either very important or not important at all depending on your other qualifications. Some employers value hiring people who are turning their lives around. There are even financial benefits to employers for hiring formerly incarcerated persons. Show that you are one of the people worthy of that opportunity.

Sometimes we are so overwhelmed by the stigma of our records that we forget how talented and hardworking and qualified we are for a position. **YOU ARE NOT YOUR RECORD.** Don't run away from your criminal record. Face it and learn how to address it. It is a skill that you can learn and develop. Ask for help along the way. Remember, people with records are working at many levels of society, and that means you can, too.





Harmful Health Care

Kwaneta Harris

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Every Monday, I complete a sick call request for chest pain. After filing a grievance and having two normal menstrual cycles, I get an appointment date. The day of the appointment, I awake to the usual sound of gunshots; every Texas prison has a gun range nearby. We hear them practicing and practicing, but for what? Best not to think about that. This is the Lone Star State: God, guns, and goons.

“Strip out!” the young female officer yells.

“Yes, ma’am,” I answer to this officer who is younger than my youngest. I quickly remove every clothing item, passing them to her through a shoebox-size open food slot in the door. Once I’m nude, I must raise my breasts, stomach, and arms; show her the bottoms of my feet; bend at the waist and spread my buttocks; tilt my nose up; expose the space behind my ears; open my mouth; lift my tongue; and run my fingers through my hair. She returns my clothing. She is only to strip me. There aren’t enough women officers to do much more.

I’m praying that I don’t get any of the CO’s we’ve secretly nicknamed *The Weinstein*

Group. I wouldn’t be going to medical if it wasn’t urgent. I only need a normal, non-perverted guard to escort me downstairs to medical. Is that too much to ask?

I notice a pair of kids, barely legal men, horseplaying on the stairs. We’ve nicknamed them the Twin Toddlers. Their combined age doesn’t equal mine. The state gives them responsibility to write disciplinary infractions, resulting in longer prison stays, but they aren’t old enough to purchase cigarettes or beer. I’m glad it’s them. Although verbally abusive, they aren’t physically abusive. They handcuff me behind my back and, with each one holding an arm, we pass my mentally ill next-door neighbor. She is in her birthday suit, sitting on a table, masturbating with a tube of Colgate.

The toddler on my left cheers her on: “Keep going and sing ‘Jingle Bells’ to get the voices out of your head.”

“Then they’ll go away forever?” she asks.

“I promise,” replies the cruel one.

The occupant of the next cell comes to the door to wish me luck and to tell me that she’s praying for me. She has mismatched

breasts: One is a DD cup, the other a B. She arrived at prison with breast implants with one malfunctioning. The system refuses to treat her, claiming it's cosmetic, not reconstructive. This exacerbates her untreated mental illness and eating disorders.

Before I'm through the medical door, the physician assistant (PA) demands that I get on the scale. My escorts begin guessing my weight.

One comments, "It's that donkey ass you Black girls got."

"What's your weight?" the PA asks. One of the Twin Toddlers answers for me, 186 pounds.

increase, and their fight-or-flight (or freeze) instinct kicks in. The environment I live in is one of constant microaggressions and macroaggressions, overt sexism, and racism. This prolonged stress seeps into people's biology, which accelerates aging. This is why Black Americans "live sicker and die quicker."

A female med tech barges in to open a screened privacy divider six feet away and yells, "Call me when you're ready!" The handcuffs are transferred to the front, and the twins go behind the screen. The PA continues typing with two fingers and instructs me, "Pull your panties down, your bra up, cover up."

I obey. I exhale.

A baked-in cynicism about what we say and complain about exists. The privilege of being believed rarely exists for Black women, and it is completely absent for incarcerated Black women.

The PA pecks at his keyboard and informs me that at 5' 7", I am not overweight but obese. The adult children giggle. My vital signs are next. Usually my blood pressure is 110/70. This time, it's 152/104.

"You people need to cut back on the salt," the PA says.

I wonder, who are "you people"? Inmates? Women? Blacks? The obese?

Researchers studying racial disparities in health ascribe them to toxic stress, which affects all systems of the body. Every time anyone experiences stress, their heart rate and blood pressure increase, their stress hormones

Studies show that survivors of sexual violence may experience medical exams as traumatic, thus avoiding them altogether at their peril. Over 70% of incarcerated women have a history of sexual abuse. In society, a female is supposed to be in the room at all times during intimate exams. That courtesy does not extend to women in prison.

Two older male guards join the twins behind the screen. I can see the tops of their heads. They are there to relieve the younger pair for a break. I tense when I realize it's Dawson (nicknamed after Richard Dawson from *Family Feud*) and Shadow (nicknamed

because he imitates the beliefs, words, and actions of his coworkers). The PA is within spitting distance as he asks me about my medical history. The four officers are in the middle of a boisterous discussion about hog hunting when suddenly Dawson says, “I’m just ready to shoot something.” The PA yells over their voices a litany of questions: How many abortions? How many miscarriages? How many STIs?

“None, none, none,” I reply.

“When was your last menstrual period?” he continues. “You’re no spring chicken. Are you having vaginal dryness?”

The men giggle.

“You’ve been complaining of chest pain on and off,” he says. “What’s your drug of choice?”

“I never used drugs,” I reply.

He repeats the question twice, and I repeat my answer twice. He begins to ask again; I interrupt and answer, “Ice cream, that’s my drug of choice.”

“You don’t have any drug convictions,” he persists. “That don’t mean nothing.”

Suddenly, someone says, “She just ain’t got caught.”

I’m prescribed to drink more water, and he offers me generic Tylenol, non-aspirin.

“Does she have non-pain?” Shadow asks over the screen. They all laugh.

I don’t. I exhale.

A baked-in cynicism about what we say and complain about exists. The privilege of being believed rarely exists for Black women, and it is completely absent for incarcerated Black women. Prisoners are the only group to have a constitutional right to health care. I misinterpreted that to mean their health should actually be cared about.

The female pops in, and I’m relieved—someone to break up this testosterone convention. She appears at my side, rushing the PA. He begins with a breast exam, reminding me to do them daily. As he palpates, I’m on the verge of a panic attack. I’m nervous because my friend Trish’s experience is haunting me. She complained that he repeatedly lifted her breasts by the nipples, then released them, causing them to drop painfully. The tech looks at her watch and passes him a speculum.

“Nobody washed their hands,” I blurt out. “I don’t need a pelvic exam. I’m good.”

Both shrugged.

I remain silent as I dress. Self-advocacy can get me in trouble and denied medical care. Too many questions, and subsequent visits will be denied with the lie “inmate refused care.” Another blood pressure reading reveals 165/104. The oblivious PA says, “Let’s go with the first reading.” He is baffled as to why this reading is higher. I know: It’s because of my pervy escorts leering. My hands are cuffed behind my back. Shadow and Dawson are the remaining officers. Shadow is on my left, and Dawson is behind me, holding my right arm. He shifts as he walks. He rubs his genitals against my handcuffed hands.

The return trip feels longer. I don’t notice any girls in the cells I pass. Somehow, I make it to my cell. I’m grateful. As he removes my handcuffs and slams the cell door, I exhale.

In the U.S., women are the fastest-growing group of people locked up in state and federal prisons, county jails, and juvenile detention centers. This “fail care” the carceral system provides only serves to compound trauma.



Refuse to Succumb

Justin Guyton

Yes, I've made my fair share of mistakes, some of which resulted in incarceration. When I arise each morning and look in the mirror, I don't see a saint—I see a human being. I see a man whose flaws caused him to endure hardships along the way on his journey to Ohio's Supermax Prison. Since December 23, 2015, I've been subjected to solitary confinement.

This 7' x 14' cell was designed to alter my mind and break me—if not physically, then mentally. The detrimental effects of long-term solitary confinement have been well documented. The harmful symptoms that many victims of this type of punishment develop include, but are not limited to, perceptual distortions, hallucinations, increased anxiety, nervousness, rage, depression, and suicide.

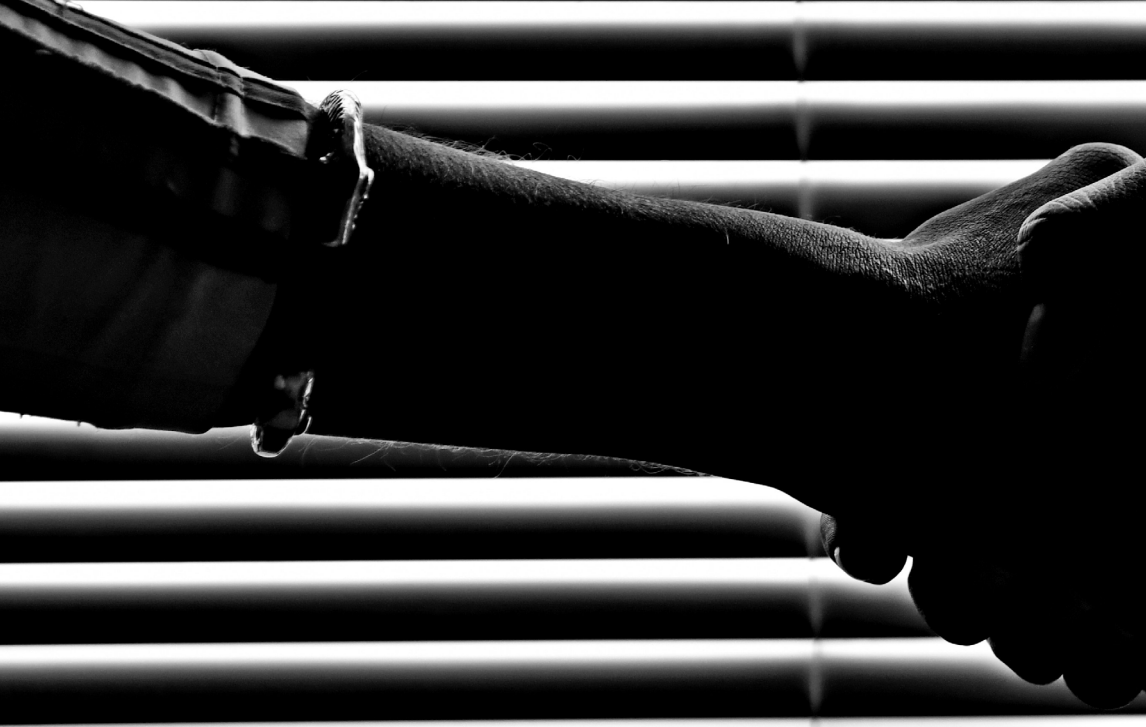
The practice of solitary confinement deprives an individual of their basic human rights. When this is paired with a prison staff of whom many have the attitude that once in solitary confinement an individual is no longer human, you get another layer of torture. That lack of compassion results in instances in which a prisoner who may be experiencing deterioration of their mental health gets repeatedly and excessively sprayed with cans of pepper spray as a result of their mental health lapse.

In this setting I've even seen the basic human right of food denied as a form of pun-

ishment. I can recall many times when prison staff have removed all but a few spoonfuls of food from a tray that was to be served in an attempt to literally starve a prisoner they despise. I've had close friends, no longer able to push through the conditions of this environment, commit suicide. I have witnessed things that are unfathomable to the average person, like multiple instances of self-mutilation and someone refusing to eat with the hope of dying just to escape their mental anguish.

As I approach more than seven years of having been subjected to these inhumane conditions, the experience has made me look deep within myself. I've witnessed things that will be forever etched within my mind. Still, I refuse to be broken. The conditions I've endured have only made me seek refuge in developing inner strength that won't allow me to succumb to the mental and physical hazards of solitary confinement.

Sadly, many aren't able to find that type of strength within themselves. This is one thing I've learned from writing and publishing a book about my experiences within the system. You never know how sharing your story will impact or change the lives of others. Moving forward, as I near my release from prison, I hope others will find the strength to overcome through writings like this one.



A Small Look at the Return Home

Ending the collateral damage caused by mass incarceration means a change in the way reentry and recidivism are defined, policies are created, and services are provided to affected individuals. Most often, the barriers created by being involved with the criminal legal system limit the person's rights to have full citizenship restored. The transition from prison to community might be viewed as unremarkable by some; however, reintegration into society after being under correctional control is difficult. The transition is full of unexpected twists and turns, not to mention marginalization, rejection, and defeatism.

Three decades of policies aimed at be-

ing tough on crime have created barriers to supporting reintegration. The social costs of our failing criminal justice system, such as the harm done by it to people, families, and communities, are detrimental to the health and welfare of our society. Financially, there is around \$2.9 billion in cost to families, with women paying much of the cost in black communities (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2020). The burden is carried largely by already detrimentally marginalized low-income and minority communities (Edge, 2009).

Successful reintegration is not simply a function of choosing not to commit crimes; it is also the result of having sufficient access to resources, opportunities, and reintegration



from Correctional Control

MoDena Stinnette
and Ray Legler

Layout by Brian T. Shaw. Photo by Savvas Stavrinou from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/monochrome-photography-of-people-shaking-hands-814544>.

capital that make criminal activity undesirable and less likely. Reintegration capital develops through networks as people and communities are empowered through groups that might not normally come together in collaboration (Koschmann & Peterson, 2013).

Johnson (2008) asserts that reintegration programming promotes safer communities and reduces the likelihood of an individual's reoffending. Programming is a means by which to facilitate the reintegration process for individuals returning home; however, not all programming is useful in reaching the goal of reducing reengagement in criminal activity.

Education is a major barrier for the for-

merly incarcerated individual in the attempt to become gainfully employed. Employability often increases through training and education, activities in which a formerly incarcerated individual may be legally barred from engaging. Criminologists identify successful reentry as being highly dependent on the individual's ability to find and sustain employment and earn a living wage. Education is tied to employment and the identification of qualified candidates (Buitrago et al., 2020).

Some states have been identified as having implemented effective reintegration programming and institutional practices that promote successful reintegration. These

states promote integration that begins in the institution and extends through release into the community. Given the hundreds of thousands of individuals who will be released annually, this is an area of theory, research, and practice that warrants concentrated and sustained attention (Jonson & Cullen, 2015).

California

The state of California boasts, “[T]hrough extensive community partnerships, innovative community supervision and a commitment to rehabilitation, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) is helping offenders succeed as they return to their communities. Comprehensive pre- and post-release rehabilitative programs and services are offered in communities throughout California delivered through alternative custody, residential, outpatient and drop-in centers” (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2021).

Illinois

In 2019, the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) created a new program whose focus is on providing the necessary services to people returning to society. Administrator for the Reentry Program Jennifer Parrack says it’s about bridging the gap between life inside prison and life when people are released on parole. “We really knew that we were not adequately preparing our men and women to leave our correctional facilities and be successful,” she says. “For our men and women [who] have worked really hard in our correctional facilities to better them-

selves and get prepared to have a better life to support their family members upon release, we really need to be working hard to assist them” (O’Brien, 2020).

Minnesota

To reduce recidivism, the Minnesota Comprehensive Offender Reentry Plan (MCORP) attempts to increase offender access to community services and programming by producing greater case management collaboration between caseworkers in prison and supervision agents in the community. MCORP significantly improves employment rates, decreases homelessness, broadens offenders’ systems of social support, and increases the extent to which offenders participate in community support programming (mentoring, restorative justice services, and faith-based programming).

New Jersey

More than 20,000 individuals participated in the Residential Community Release Program (RCRP). With the emphasis on rehabilitation, community corrections facilities have played a major role in reducing New Jersey’s prison population. The evidence-based programs provide a safe, structured environment in which offenders nearing release into the community rebuild their lives through programs that address criminogenic factors and substance-abuse-related issues. All the programs emphasize reducing chemical dependency, shifting attitudes toward criminal behavior, promoting relapse prevention, and skill maintenance (Reentry Coalition New Jersey, 2021).

Washington

The Department of Corrections of Washington State reports, “[T]hough most individuals who are incarcerated will return to their communities, successful transitions are difficult. The likelihood of successful transition can be improved with utilization of re-

entry programs and practices. The Department is committed to being reentry-focused and providing resources for individuals currently in and leaving the system, to assist in safe and successful transition to the community” (Department of Corrections, Washington State, 2021).

State-by-State Reentry Best Practice Pre-Release (Stinnette, 2022)

Best Practice	California	Illinois	Minnesota	New Jersey	Washington
Individual Reentry Plan	X	X	X	X	X
Reentry Case Management	X	X	X	X	X
Behavioral Health Services	X	X	X	X	X
Basic Education	X	X	X	X	X
Higher Education	X	X	X	X	X
Employment Training			X		X
Medication		X			
Resource Guide	X	X	X		
Voting					

State-by-State Reintegration Best Practice Post-Release (Stinnette, 2022)

Best Practice	California	Illinois	Minnesota	New Jersey	Washington
Identification	X	X	X	X	X
Health Insurance	X	X	X	X	X
Food Benefits	X	X	X	X	X
Behavior Health Services	X	X	X	X	X
Supportive Services	X	X	X	X	X
Employment	X	X	X	X	X
Education/Training	X	X	X	X	X
Voting	X	X		X	X
Transportation					
Automatic Restoration					

Each of these states is self-directed in the ways it approaches planning around reentry, and they have created similar practices that are consistent within each. It is understood that it is worthwhile to begin reentry planning as soon as an individual is incarcerated. Completion of a thorough assessment identifies key areas to focus on during incarceration and involves individual case management to create a reentry plan. Developing programming that addresses cognitive skills, education, employability, social engagement, civic responsibility, health, and other life areas produces opportunities

incarcerated individuals. Academic settings are ideal for individuals returning home because they allow them to demonstrate discipline, bring additional wisdom and life experience to their learning environments, and practice patience and restraint (Phillips, 2020). Education is the centerpiece of all human transformation—there is no hope and there are no dreams without it (Reese, 2017).

Though some pre-release practices are not consistent across the five states, they are noteworthy as best practices. Legislative support is paramount for states creating policies and practices that are empowering to indi-

Abolishing the stigma that dehumanizes individuals because of their backgrounds creates opportunities for self-actualization and more supportive networks within the community.

for restorative healing. Creating an environment of safety and trust promotes engagement and participation in programming. Each state recognizes basic and higher education as a way to interrupt the cycle of returning to prison.

Help with obtaining identification, health insurance, and food benefits upon reentry is the first step toward building a foundation for reintegration. Behavioral health services, especially for individuals with mental health or substance use disorder diagnoses, are necessary in order to assist individuals in maintaining their mental and emotional health.

Additionally, education and/or training opportunities create the needed tools for sustainability and financial stability for formerly

individuals returning home; however, legislative support without action does not work.

While each state operates differently based on funding and policy, some similarities exist. Each state takes advantage of federal legislation that promotes reentry/reintegration (the Second Chance Act) and is afforded funding for the policy or policies it creates around the federal legislation. That funding is meant to be used to support the policy in any way the state deems appropriate.

These states demonstrate collaborative partnerships between corrections departments and the community. The picture looks different from state to state; however, collaboration strengthens programming and services, which benefits the upholding of re-

entry/reintegration practices.

The states that include formerly incarcerated individuals in state-level decision-making and employment opportunities have shown great success in building inclusive reentry/reintegration systems. Abolishing the stigma that dehumanizes individuals because of their backgrounds creates opportunities for self-actualization and more supportive networks within the community.

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Requiem for the Shadow People

Michael Berg

Today they closed industry early and are running the facility on a “holiday schedule.” Why? Because a CO recently passed, and the staff needs to attend the funeral.

Many of the staff may not have even known the guy, but it’s a good excuse to get some paid time off. Still, he was a son and may have been a brother, husband, father, mentor, and friend.

So, when are we going to have funerals for the inmates? We, too, are all that.

I’ve lost two people close to me in the last month: Ramone, who killed himself on Christmas Day because he couldn’t take the pain of his TBI any longer—a TBI caused by the medical malfeasance in this facility—and Ron Davis, who was murdered through that same medical malfeasance. Davis died on December 12 of COPD, which this facility refused to treat despite the fact that he had been receiving regular treatments at his former facility.

Both men were coworkers and friends. I will never be able to say my goodbyes. There will never be a service for these men—never an opportunity to celebrate their lives or the impact they might have had on my life.

Then there was Zombie, two or so years ago, and before him, Louie. The closest thing to a goodbye I got was when they wheeled their dead bodies past my cell.

My last image of Zombie was after rigor mortis, when he was so stiff that his arm vibrated as they wasted the effort on chest compressions. As far as I know, he’s in a box somewhere behind the facility, under a plaque with only a DIN on it. He couldn’t even get a decent burial.

My last image of Louie was as a pale, limp “fish,” drooling foam from the Narcan they’d

injected into him.

Many of these men were likely sons, brothers, fathers, friends, and maybe even mentors.

What about them? When can I say goodbye? I'll never have that option. Instead, I have to carry that grief around like a ball and chain attached to my heart. The pain of their loss is every bit as real to me as it could (and should) be for you.

Why is it presumed that because we're "inmates" we have no feelings, that we don't care about others, that we don't grieve? Perhaps it's because to you we're just shadows: not real, no longer human but something less, maybe even less than animals or insects.

What you don't understand is that someday you too will be nothing but shadows. A faded memory, sometimes good, too often not, but always bitter. This is the way of life—a path we all must travel.

When that day comes, as it must for each of us, it won't matter that I wore green and you wore blue. Or that I got convicted (guilty or otherwise) and that you didn't (guilty or otherwise). Or that I was a prisoner and that you never saw the inside of a jail.

At the end of it all, we'll each stand before God, alone, and account for our lives. There will be no excuses, no "pass," no second chances. Whether "elite" or "shadow"; rich or poor; sovereign or slave; black, white, Hispanic, or other, we will all be naked before God. And He knows every secret of each heart.

Remember the shadow people—there's very little that separates us.



SECTION INTRO: PERCEPTION

It's the lies we are told by others, as well as those we tell ourselves, that too often control how we navigate life. Such lies repress our spirit and physical abilities in ways that make us believe we are incapable of being humane and achieving our goals. In listening to these distortions, we can lose sight of our true value. The following pieces are about challenging misrepresentations and staying true to ourselves.

Still, it can be difficult to bear our truths. We may hide behind false narratives because they seem like the easier choice. The voices of those who lack compassion and promote self-doubt can overwhelm us.

We can choose to be defined by these distortions or we can move beyond them, to connect with those who care, and begin to see the truth of our life. It is, of course, not easy but necessary if we are to embrace all we are and can be—to create inner and outer change.

Some authors in this section reflect on how we see a particular place. Marvin Wade, in “Getting Over the Mountains,” reminds us how our understanding of place is a matter of perception. Similarly, in “My Safe Place,” Gary A. Marez reflects on how a troubled childhood led him to view prison as a place of peace. Though one may be jolted by this thought, Marez helps us see how prison can be an escape from the outside world.

Others urge us to view the world through a different lens. Gary McCain, for example, takes a satirical stance in “A Reasonable Solution to Gun Violence,” questioning the meaning of safety in the United States. And

in “On Caring,” Ronald Short offers an honest and remarkable account of contemplating suicide and how sharing a hot pot, coffee, and ultimately education led to a friendship and reason to live. Short affirms the power of connection and its potential in helping us see the world and each other in new ways.

Most importantly, these authors remind us that change in how we perceive ourselves and the world can happen, but it takes time. In “Redemption after Three Decades,” Robert Ehrenberg powerfully showcases the changes individuals undergo behind bars. He also details how important support is for successful reintegration back into society.

We close with Vicki Hicks’ “The Card,” in which she questions the reader’s judgment of her. Her words remind us to interrogate the prejudices and assumptions we carry, to operate with humility, and to strive to understand the world and histories different from our own. By acknowledging past pain and trauma, we can better embrace compassion and be attentive to others—without judgment.

While these writers take us on various journeys, their stories assert that the human condition is not one of retreat but one of perseverance. No matter what we voluntarily or involuntarily go through, it is necessary that we find the humane part of ourselves. It is in that inner part where personal worth rests. Feed it. Allow it to grow. And it will give life not only to you but to others. With the right support and guidance, anything is possible.

—Brian T. Shaw with
Fátima Bings Martínez

Getting Over the Mountains

Marvin Wade



Layout by Tory White. Photo by Simone Defendi from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/silhouette-of-mountains-during-sunset-12762122>.

It was my first time headed up north, and I was shackled to a gang member, jostling for legroom. I thought to myself, *He has the aisle seat; I got the window seat. If he bangs against my leg with his leg one more time, I'm just going to shoulder him out of his seat.* He must have read my mind or felt my energy because that was the last time he tried to bully me in the connected two seats we shared.

We were headed to Downstate Correctional Facility, which most referred to as "Downstate." I found this comical, though, because to us, anything past the Bronx was known as "Up North." On we rode in silence; for the most part, I lost myself in thought as the mountains came into view. But despite being lost to the passing world outside of the bus, I occasionally had to remember where I was. The guy I was shackled to had a few of his homies with him on the prison bus. I was by myself, a neutral. With no other "bout it" neutrals on the bus with me, I had a feeling that once we got Downstate, they were all going to move on me. But just in case, I was ready for him and his boys if it popped off.

In November of 1994, at the age of 24, I was arrested and detained at the Brooklyn House of Detention on a charge of second-degree murder. I thought it was all a game, and I believed I would be going home soon. I held on to this belief even as I was being transported on a bus to Rikers Island. The ride had no impact on me at the time. I was truly naive to it all. I took it all as a joke. I took life as a joke. Nothing seemed real to me at this point. A year later, at the age of 25, I was convicted and sentenced to 25 years to

life. Now here I was leaving Rikers Island on a bus traveling north. I was about to leave everything I had and everyone I loved behind me. It was then that reality began to set in for me. Not until I was sitting shackled on that prison bus that cold December day in 1995, leaving Rikers for Downstate, did I begin to accept that this shit was real!

I remember trying to savor all the things that passed me by as I looked through the gated window. The people, vehicles, buildings...you name it, I tried to absorb it all. The fact that I was linked at the ankle by a small chain to a 250-pound gangbanger didn't make grasping it all easy for me. He and I didn't speak to one another except for when he asked me, "What you claiming?" I told him, "I'm neutral." I guess it was based on my neutrality that he first began to leg jostle, but that wasn't happening. What a lot of bangers and neutrals found out throughout my bid was that I was no sucker. So he and I ended up having a very uncomfortable ride, with lots of dirty looks, leg positioning, and indirect comments by him to his homies on the bus. I ignored him and just stared out the window at the ugly-looking mountains. Damn, I missed the skyscrapers already.

There wasn't much violence either of us could do to the other at this point, what with our being shackled at the ankles and handcuffed at the wrists. I was prepared for a fight with this brother and his homies as soon as we reached Downstate and were released from our restraints, but after a few more dirty looks at each other after we landed, we went our separate ways. Three days later, he was stabbed in the neck by a fellow banger

but survived. That was one of the first acts of brutal stabbing I would witness upstate, while on the island there were mostly slashings and fights. This was the start of an entirely new world for me.

For the next twenty-five years, I never traveled back to the city. Instead, when I traveled, it was from prison to prison. No skyscrapers. Only mountains. I hated the view of the mountains. The trips were so stressful. Before every trip, I would be handcuffed in the front and ankle-cuffed to another prisoner. The cuffing in the front wasn't with just the handcuffs themselves; the link of the cuffs was encased in a small metal box that allowed for no flexibility or movement of the wrist, just pure torture for the hours of the bus ride. You ate with these cuffs on, and even if you had to take a piss (in the bathroom in the back of the bus), you had to do it with the cuffs on and with your ankle-mate still attached to you just outside the bathroom door. So inhumane.

During these trips I would also always worry about whether all my property would make it with me—my pictures, food, clothing, and footwear. I had only about three bags of property, but they were all I had and were everything to me. Some guys traveled with six or seven bags. Anything over three bags, you had to pay for shipping. Your property traveled either with you on the bus you were on or on a separate bus. It would all be scrutinized and processed by the correctional officers from the prison you were leaving and then scrutinized and processed by the correctional officers of your new facility. They would be helped by other prisoners. You always traveled with the possibility of an officer looking out for his pet prisoner by of-

fering him a few of your items as a gift or the conniving efforts of some prisoners to take things from you on their own. Your property was always at risk; I was robbed a few times, usually of sneakers. With all these things to think about and deal with on this ride, the mountains were usually all you saw outside the window. Their presence felt to me to be the proverbial “welcome mat” on the way into the abyss. I despised them.

In 2019 I was granted parole after twenty-five years incarcerated. I was now in Fishkill Correctional Facility. About 40 days before I was to be released, I was told I was going to be transferred to a minimum-security prison called Queensboro Correctional Facility in Long Island City in Queens.

In the morning, a handful of other brothers and I were preparing for our trip to Queensboro. I was pinching myself to see if I was dreaming. I really couldn't believe I was headed back to the city and going home. The bus ride to Queensboro was a trip I'll never forget. While watching the last of the mountains pass me by as we made our way to the city, I frowned in hatred at them. They towered above me with a smirk, it seemed, tempting me to put my middle finger up to the window at them, but instead I just turned my head down in the direction of my lap in deep thought. I hated those mountains. Memories of all the torment I had experienced and witnessed in all the prisons I had been in flooded my consciousness. The mountains reminded me of all those things. They reminded me of all the different prisons I had been transferred to. They reminded me of the many painful trips from Sing Sing Correctional Facility to Westchester County Hospital for my herniated disc.

And they reminded me of all the times I had stood in the middle of the prison yard wondering if I'd ever make it out alive, surrounded by barbed wire fences, a concrete wall, and the mountains in the backdrop. So I couldn't wait until those mountains were no longer in my peripheral vision and were behind me, literally and figuratively, along with all the prisons of upstate New York.

When the familiar buildings first came into view as we entered the Bronx, laughter was shared and tears were shed by all. Some guys more familiar with the area pointed out the schools we passed, or the parks. "Yo, that's Shoelace Park!" yelled E Money, a longtime Bronx resident. Finally coming home after 30 years. I thought about all the brothers on this bus ride and how together we all probably totaled over 300 years incarcerated. That's when my tears started. It was so unbelievable. No more fucking mountains! On my trip from Rikers to Downstate, enemies had unfortunately been formed on that bus filled with so much uncertainty, fear, and anger. But on this bus back into the city, with freedom only days away, forever friendships were forged. E Money was being paroled to the Bronx; I told him that my cousin lived in the Bronx. So we made plans to hang out and toast to freedom once settling in. And that was exactly what we did after meeting up at the Fortune Society building in Queens (the location of an organization that helped returning citizens with their transitions home). We didn't go to a bar to toast; we simply went to the corner deli. He grabbed a Diet Pepsi and I grabbed a bottle of water, and we toasted to freedom. What a moment. What a trip. It was a bus ride wrapped in hope, joy, and optimism. Things

that had been lost among us all for so many years were found on that road to freedom.

I was finally released on November 14, 2019, a day I will never forget. A beautiful overcast Thursday. Breezy, not cold. I wore a black cotton hooded sweatshirt with pants to match. A white T-shirt underneath the sweatshirt and a pair of black Timberland boots on my feet. I kept it simple and inexpensive. Didn't care about going home in style, just wanted to go home.

I waited in anticipation for my name to be called to sign out, grab my documents and property, and head on out the door. It seemed like forever. I still at times thought I was dreaming. Because over the years in prison I had always had dreams of being released only to have it turn into a nightmare when the CO's couldn't locate my paperwork, the doors wouldn't open up to the outside, or someone would force me into a fight and I'd be brought back into the cell block—you name it, I dreamed it. So the longer they took to call my name, the more worried I got. Then finally I heard the CO yell out, "Marvin Wade!" Other prisoners who were still waiting to be released clapped in celebration. I went into the office, signed my release papers, grabbed my documents and property (just my hair clippers, pictures, and all the short stories I had written over the years), and headed toward the door to freedom.

The facility sat right on the corner of Van Dam Street in Queens. Thousands of people passed by this building every day who probably didn't know it was a minimum-security prison. As I approached the front door, I could see my mother through the plexiglass window in the door, pacing back and forth

on the corner across the street. Unbelievable. *Please don't be a dream*, I said to myself. "Good luck," said the CO as he swung open the door for me. "Thank you," I said in return. My mother's beaming face as she watched me walk through those doors is forever etched in my memory. I still don't remember how I made it across the street to where my mother stood along with my brother and his wife. Did I run? Did I jog? Did I fly? I don't know. I definitely don't believe I walked. But what I do remember is the long and tight embrace my mother and I shared. It wasn't only 25 years for me but 25 years for her as well. This day was long overdue.

Seeing that my mother and I didn't want to let go of one another, my brother and his wife eventually joined in with a group hug. What a beautiful moment.

My first meal was two Big Macs and fries from McDonald's. It felt as if it took me three hours to finish that meal. I thought the workers there would eventually ask us to leave, but they didn't. Every bite of the meal tasted the way I had dreamed it would taste, and I wanted to savor it.

Before heading home and sharing long embraces with my stepfather and my nieces and nephew, we went to my sister's burial site. My sister Donnette had passed away from cancer in 2017, a few weeks after her fiftieth birthday. She had been my light. She had been there for me emotionally more than anyone else. I had been able to share things with her that I couldn't with anyone else. I'd received a letter from her almost every week. Whenever I was at my breaking point, there would be a letter from her to lift me back up. At her burial site in Brooklyn, I thanked her for being there for me and for

all her letters that had gotten me through so many dark days. My sister not being there to share in my joy was and still is my only pain after my release. I told her how much I loved and missed her and held myself tight in my own embrace, saying softly to her, "I made it home, Sis. I made it home."

In the summer of 2020, I met a beautiful young lady with whom I shared a great few months. She knew that after just coming home after so many years, I wasn't ready to be in a committed relationship; I was honest with her about that. But she was a free-spirited being with her own light, so the openness we agreed to have in our relationship was mutual. It was a beautiful and unforgettable summer and fall. I learned so much more about life and the world from "My Ecuadorian Goddess," a title she loved. To this day we are still great friends. On one hot summer morning, we were leaving my cousin's house in the Bronx trying to decide where to eat breakfast. She loved to travel, loved to drive. She said to me, "Hey, I know a Mexican restaurant upstate, great food and music—let's go there and eat." The minute she said "upstate," I thought of mountains. *No way*, I said to myself, and I immediately shot down that idea and suggested we just eat there in the Bronx. But she was insistent: "I'm tired of eating from the same old places. Let's try something new."

"But they're not old to me, babe," I pleaded. "I mean, we can even go down into Manhattan or Brooklyn. There's plenty of places to eat in the city."

"But I don't want to eat in the city," she pouted beautifully. "I want to eat upstate somewhere." After about a five-minute back-and-forth, I grudgingly agreed to go

dine upstate at a place called Maya Cafe and Cantina in Fishkill.

I was quiet as she drove. This was the start of the third most impactful trip of my life. As the mountains neared, I began to get anxious. She asked me if I was okay. I nodded yes, but I wasn't. It was then I knew that my dear friend was deliberately trying to help me to heal. I had spoken to her during the summer about my hatred of the mountains.

She loved the outdoors. She had worked at one time as a travel agent. She knew all the best deals and discounts and took full advantage of her opportunity to travel all over the world, showing me the pictures from all the places she'd been, from the illuminated caves of Mexico to the beautiful beaches of Saint-Tropez in France. She adored and appreciated nature, from the mountains to the trees to the birds to the ocean. She would always try to convince me of their beauty. But I guess because I couldn't be free to truly appreciate the beauty and blessings of these things, I rebelled against them, especially the mountains. "There's no beauty in the mountains," I would say to her.

But I was wrong.

That hot summer morning as we drove up to Fishkill, I finally began to see the beauty in all of nature. The birds as they flew above...the flow of the Hudson River when we passed it...but especially the mountains. Those mountains. I can't pinpoint specifically what it was that sparked my sudden appreciation of them. I can just remember not turning away from their majestic presence and truly taking them in rock by rock, sort of the same way I had tried to take in all the people, places, and things on that gloomy bus ride from Rikers to upstate

back in '95, face by face, street sign by street sign, building by building. But I was taking it all in this time in a way that felt as if I was gaining something in my life and not losing anything. I sat up in my seat and admired the strength and depth of these peaceful giants. I took pictures as we drove by. I realized as I clicked away that I had hated something I had never truly known and had always associated with loss and the prison system, a system in which I had experienced and witnessed so much pain and sorrow within. The mountains had never done me any harm, and yet I had hated them with the same fire I had against the system that had enslaved me and kept me far away from my loved ones. But on that day I saw their beauty and felt the spirit of these massive beings. I no longer hated the mountains; I loved them, I appreciated them. We enjoyed a great meal at the Mexican restaurant and even ended up staying overnight at a nearby hotel. We drove and drove further upstate during the night, just taking in and appreciating the sights and sounds that encompassed us. The moonlit sky; the summer night breeze through our windows; the sound of life in the air that for so long in my life had been filled with sounds of despair, hopelessness, and at times dead silence. My friend told me as we drove around, "You are free, Marvin. You are free!" I laughed in agreement. She laughed. The mountains laughed as well. I was finally truly free.

We are constantly in motion. Even as we sit still, we are moved, sometimes seemingly without a purpose, but always with the meaning of it all in the end. Life is a trip. Just pay attention to the signs along the way. It's your only chance to make it back home.



My Safe Place

Gary A. Marez

In 1987 I was in the fifth grade at Lockwood Elementary School. Every Friday, the school would hold sales for the kids, selling things like bags of popcorn, sour pickles, cupcakes, and other items of that nature. Though they were cheap, only a quarter or fifty cents, I never had the money, either because my parents wouldn't give me it or because we just did not have it. My parents were very abusive, and I feel as if it was because they had a drinking problem. Anyway, they handed out beatings before they handed out money, even change. This Friday, as the recess bell rang signaling that it was the sale time for all the goodies, I had to stay in my seat for five more minutes of recess because I had talked during a class lesson. Little did I know that those five minutes would change my view on life forever. I was sitting in front of the class, in a time-out seat that was next to the teacher's desk, facing the chalkboard. The teacher told me to stay in my seat until she came back from the restroom. As she walked out of the classroom, I started to look around. There were two other kids who had also stayed behind.

As I sat there, swinging my legs back and forth, I leaned forward and saw my teacher's open purse and a folded five-dollar bill right there, just inches from my feet. Not even thinking about it, I reached down and grabbed the money. To my surprise, inside the five were more bills—two more fives to be exact. Jackpot. I would be able to buy from the

Friday sale—that was my only thought.

As I sat back up, my teacher walked back in and dismissed us to recess. I was gone before she said the whole sentence. Two seconds later I was standing at the front of the snack line buying one of everything. For a moment, I was a cool kid. I was sharing with the other kids and sitting on the big swings that were reserved for the cool kids. Little did I know that I had stolen from my teacher lunch, gas, and cigarette money all in one shot.

In 1987, \$15 was a good amount of money. I also didn't realize that it was pretty easy for her to figure out who had taken it, given that I had been the only one next to her desk the only time she had been away from her purse. It didn't help much that as she found me outside, I was eating her lunch money away right along with everyone else.

I was called into the principal's office, where I admitted everything and gave her the \$13 that was in my pocket. In my school in the 1980s, if your parents signed the permission slip for the school to give you swats, you got them. Of course my parents had signed it, and I was awarded three swats from the principal's paddle. Mrs. Cox was a big lady, but she only paddled me—I was used to punches from my dad and mom, so three swats was a good day. But unfortunately that was not the end of it. When my mom came to pick me up from school, she was told what I had done, and I remember that as my name was called over the intercom, I knew I

was in more trouble.

As I went to the office, I saw our school DARE officer talking to my teacher and mom. My mom felt that it would be a good idea to scare me straight and allow me to be put in juvenile detention to show me what happened to boys who were bad and stole. I was scared as the officer put his handcuffs on me in front of all the kids who were staring. My wrists were so tiny that the cuffs kept falling off. I will never forget the feeling of seeing my mom smiling and laughing with the other grown-ups as I was walked to the car and placed in the back. It felt as if I were going to die inside; I just wanted to scream, "Please don't let them take me!" All I had wanted was a pickle and popcorn, but I knew that if I cried or screamed, I would get punished even worse, because that was what happened at home. So I just watched as my mom turned and walked to the car and asked the cop if I could stay the weekend.

The ride to jail was quick and silent. As the officer walked me into the basement of the courthouse, where the juvenile facility was, I was shaking in fear. They put me through the whole process: fingerprints, strip search, my own cell. But as I sat on my bunk, something happened in my head, something amazing. I realized that for the first time in my whole life, I had a real bed all to myself, and I didn't have to take a bath in dirty bath-water. But the coolest thing was that as the older kids looked into my cell, they all smiled

and talked to me. The thing that stood out the most was that as I woke up to pancakes and cable TV, for the first time in my life I ate three times in one day and didn't get beaten once. I got to go outside and bounce the ball around. I was safe, and because I was only seven, no one picked on me, and all the CO's and older kids protected me. Jail was great; I never wanted to leave. But as always happens, Monday came, and I was released to my mom, who beat me because I had embarrassed her. My dad got his punches in when I got home because he was drunk and mad, too. So that Friday in 1987 changed my life forever. I knew that if I wanted to feel safe and protected, all I had to do was get in trouble and I would be fed and have my own room with all the good things I never got at home.

I was seven years old then; now I am 42 going on 43 and this has become a way of living for me. I come to prison, and then I get released. But as soon as the outside world becomes too hard or I feel unsure or unsafe, I find my way back in here. I always hear people say, "We have a chance" or "We make our own choices in life, and we have no one to blame but ourselves," and I both agree and disagree. I had a choice not to take that money, but I did, and that was wrong. Yet I was never given a chance in life, and the moment I walked through that cell door, I knew and felt that this was where I wanted to stay, my safe place.

Layout by Brian T. Shaw. Photo by Johannes Plenio from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/tornado-on-body-of-water-during-golden-hour-1119974>.



A Reasonable Solution to Gun Violence

GARY MCCAIN



Gun violence in the United States has become a pervasive part of society and has long been a contentious issue among the general population. Some argue that we should implement strict gun control laws to reduce the number of firearms owned and decide who is allowed to purchase them, which, in theory, would reduce the number of murders, particularly the mass killings that have become so frequent as of late. Gun-ownership advocates such as the NRA claim that this argument is absurd because people employ a plethora of different weapons—from knives to vehicles—to murder others, whether they are targeting a single person or a crowd. They assert that people will simply find other methods of kill-

ing each other, which is a valid point—nearly anything can be used as a weapon. After a comprehensive analysis of information pertaining to the issue of gun violence in the United States, including its root causes and potential solutions, I have concluded that the best solution to gun violence in the United States is, in my humble opinion, more guns.

Not only do I argue in favor of a greater distribution of firearms in society, but I also believe we should support some of the recent open-carry bills that require no license or training to ensure that most citizens have the ability to defend themselves and their loved ones. I also believe citizens should have greater access to military-grade firearms such as assault rifles. This is crucial to creating a safe

society in which people are able to defend themselves both individually and as a whole. The Revolutionary War and, to a lesser extent, the current situation in Ukraine, is *prima facie* evidence of how a population, when properly armed, can fend off any enemy despite overwhelming odds. When faced with the dire threat of imminent invasion, the Ukrainian government armed many of its brave and patriotic citizens, who have been of great assistance to the military in fighting back against the Russian aggressors. Now envision the same scenario if all Ukrainian civilians, rather than the small percentage that were given weapons, had already been armed with fully automatic assault rifles before the conflict began. Would it not stand to reason that the Russians likely would have been immediately repelled on all fronts?

Critics will bring up the large number of mass shootings in the United States compared with other countries, with the intention of strengthening their case against firearms. However, why does the media focus solely on shootings? What about the significant number of mass stabbings in the United States (McCain)? Where is the legislation to ban knives? These dangerous weapons are not even protected by the Second Amendment, yet the media continues to focus exclusively on guns, such as the fully automatic assault rifle with an expanded magazine, while ignoring the considerable number of mass slashings that have occurred (McCain). Critics will also claim that my fellow United States citizens do not need a fully automatic assault rifle with an expanded magazine and sniper scope for self-defense because we are not attempting to journey across a zombie-infested post-apocalyptic land with a ragtag band of

survivors, nor are these weapons necessary for hunting because hunters are not stalking the deadly and elusive velociraptor in Jurassic Park. These types of preposterous arguments are designed to give the impression that some of my fellow patriotic Second Amendment supporters are gun-crazed zealots, but nothing could be further from the truth. While it may seem that some avid gun enthusiasts are fanatics simply because we have enough guns to invade a small country, the reality is that many of us are merely collectors who appreciate the exquisite form of the bipod-mounted fully automatic assault rifle with an expanded magazine and sniper scope, similarly to the way a car enthusiast admires a classic sports car. Then there are those of us who want to be prepared for the myriad life-threatening situations we face in today's society. For example, the rise of mass killings in our country is precisely why more people should own guns for self-defense purposes. Think of that glorious moment when a would-be killer stands in the midst of a crowd and prepares to use his weapon of unspecified type—probably a knife—to unleash death and destruction, only to discover that nearly everyone in the crowd is armed as well. There is a high probability that during the ensuing chaos the perpetrator will be so startled by the sight of a patriotic elderly woman brandishing a .357 Magnum—wisely carried in her oversize purse—that he will be one of the people instantly mowed down by the hail of gunfire before he has the opportunity to harm anyone.

Then we have the issue of protecting our children, who, while they are in school, are always at the mercy of any maniac with a bladed weapon. Many of my fellow ammo

aficionados argue that teachers should be armed while in school, which is a tremendous idea. However, I am not certain that it is enough. What happens if the teacher is killed? Who will defend the children then? Why not take the next logical step and allow children—fully trained, of course—to arm themselves as well? The only unquestionable way for children to defend themselves is by having the tools to take such action on their own behalf. Obviously a child could not carry a bipod-mounted fully automatic assault rifle with an expanded magazine, a sniper scope, and a silencer, but we could allow them to possess handguns that would be appropriate for their size and ability. More-

base in this particular industry. Companies could offer firearms in a variety of bright colors and patterns, specifically designed to appeal to our youngest consumers. We could give our children the tools they need to protect themselves while also increasing our country's prosperity. From my perspective, this is the very essence of the American Way. How could anyone reasonably object to such a patriotic and pro-family position? Imagine the look of utter horror on a villain's face, as he strides into a classroom with malicious intentions and a weapon of undetermined type, when he encounters a plucky young student named Timmy who reaches into his backpack and pulls out his neon-green

When you are fending off an assault on your home by machete-wielding gang members or your compound is under siege by federal agents, you will most certainly need a bipod-mounted fully automatic assault rifle with an expanded magazine, a sniper scope, a silencer, and armor-piercing bullets.

over, if there are doubts regarding the capability of children in these situations, one needs to look no further than the legions of children who act as militia soldiers in various war-ravaged countries, such as Uganda. Indeed, if one has reservations regarding a child's ability in combat situations, then I suggest that you consider the Lord's Resistance Army (Eichstaedt). Children have proven to be not only brave in the face of an enemy but quite proficient at slaying said enemy as well. Thus I am certain that a group of these little killing machines could handle a typical "lone wolf" killer. Furthermore, as a capitalist society, we must consider the potential for boosting our economy by expanding the customer

pistol—designed to look like a gun from the *Star Wars* films and likely festooned with SpongeBob SquarePants stickers—and proceeds to riddle the fiend with bullets.

Unfortunately, the danger even for adults goes beyond the confines of their own homes. What would you do if members of a drug cartel mistook you or a loved one for a police informant? What would you do if you were living with an anti-government militia and the United States government was attempting to infringe upon your God-given right to overthrow it in a bloody coup? When you are fending off an assault on your home by machete-wielding gang members or your compound is under siege by federal agents,

you will most certainly need a bipod-mounted fully automatic assault rifle with an expanded magazine, a sniper scope, a silencer, and armor-piercing bullets. My plan would possibly even end domestic violence and bring an era of familial harmony never before seen in the history of American society. An abusive father would no longer beat his wife or children because each of them would be armed. Well, one could argue, what if dear old Dad does attack his wife or children, or even shoot them? While this scenario could certainly still occur, one of the remaining members of the family could return fire rather than wait to meet a similar fate.

Think of it as similar to the nuclear arms race, which produced the concept of Mutually Assured Destruction. Visualize an American family sitting around the dinner table eating a meal in perfect harmony, beads of sweat dripping down the face of each family member as Dad wonders if Mom knows that he just lost the money for the mortgage payment during a reckless night of gambling when he was supposed to be “working late” at the office, Mom wonders if Dad knows what she was doing with Dad’s best friend while he was “working late” at the office, and their son wonders if Mom and Dad know that he is about to fail all of his classes in school. Despite all the rage-inducing problems families face on a daily basis, acts of violence in the home would become less ubiquitous due to the common desire for self-preservation that is an integral aspect of the human psyche. Think of this peaceful family meal as a microcosm of society as a whole. Is that not a dream worth striving to achieve?

The main impediment to building this

utopian civilization, in which nearly every law-abiding member of society possesses at least one firearm, is cost. Many of our fellow patriotic citizens simply lack the financial resources to purchase even the cheapest firearms. Rather than forcing these families to choose between food and their patriotic duty to defend themselves, their community, and their country, I support adding sufficient funding to the budget to create a new social program. This program would give each American family living below the poverty line a one-time payment voucher that could be used only to purchase a firearm for each family member and an adequate amount of ammunition. While the amount would not be enough money to buy a bipod-mounted fully automatic assault rifle with an expanded magazine, a night-vision sniper scope, a silencer, and armor-piercing bullets, it would certainly allow them to procure a decent gun for self-defense.

The problem of violence committed by evil, unpatriotic persons who occasionally use guns instead of knives can only be addressed by the mass distribution of guns. Critics can argue about so-called “dangers” certain types of guns pose to society, but the reality is that the United States would be a safer place with bipod-mounted fully automatic rifles with expanded magazines, night vision sniper scopes, silencers, armor-piercing bullets, and grenade-launcher attachments than without them.

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On Caring

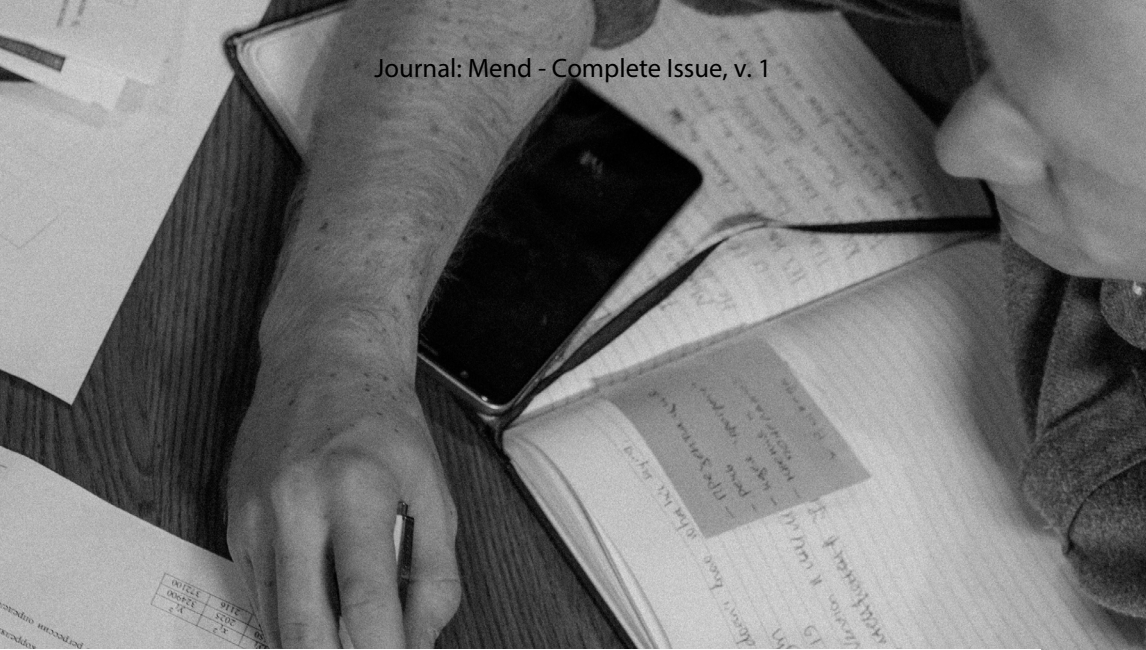
Ronald Short

Why should I care about anything? When I was in Clinton Correctional, I had only one goal for eleven years: to end my life. I attempted it several times—obviously without success. I didn't care about anything or anyone. Why should I have? My family, friends, and society in general had abandoned me. I even hated myself, and I had intense feelings of guilt and shame. I was stuck in a cell with a life sentence and no hope of ever getting out.

My judge was a celebrity—he wrote the book *Carlito's Way*, which became a movie. The media filled the courtroom during my sentencing, and Judge Torres put on a show for them. He was trying to prove how “tough on crime” he was. He gave me the maximum time in spite of my clean record. Those eleven years in Clinton Correctional were the darkest, most depressing times of my life. I was heavily medicated, but the meds did nothing for me. Then I came to Auburn, and things changed.

My next-door neighbor for three years

at Auburn was Sam. In the beginning, Sam had coffee and I had a hot pot. Sam shared his coffee with me, and I shared hot water with him. Sam was black and I was white, but I never saw his color because of how I grew up. I lived in the melting pot called the Lower East Side of Manhattan. As a child in school, I was the only white kid—the rest were black or Puerto Rican. I naturally had friends and enemies based on the content of their character, not the color of their skin. Sam and I began to share other things along with the coffee and hot water. We wanted the same thing—to end our lives—and both of us had had a similar experience while attempting to do so. This shared openness brought us together and made me feel that Sam was a kindred spirit. We shared more as time went on. We had very long sentences with no family support, and we both came to the same conclusion: Life behind bars was not worth living. We spent our days exchanging ideas on how we would be successful on



Layout by Troy White. Photo by Tima Miroshnichenko from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/gray-scale-photo-of-person-holding-paper-5686112/>.

our next suicide attempts.

Sam was going to school for his GED. When he failed the test, I thought that failure would end his efforts to get his GED. But Sam went back to school, took the test again, and passed! If our goals were the same—to end our lives—then why did he go back to school, study, and take the test a second time? I have ruminated long and hard about his perseverance; I had a catharsis because of our closeness. I realized that I did not want to see Sam die.

I realized there was a possibility of living in prison and having some kind of life worth living, but I still needed a *raison d'être*. When I heard about Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP), I immediately thought, *this is for me*. Sam saved my life by changing my goal in life. Now my goal is not to end my life, but to extend it—thanks, Sam. I still feel as if I owe Sam for saving my life, but he was transferred to another facility. So now I repay him by “paying things forward,” especially for new

and/or young inmates. I try hard to get them into CPEP or anything positive. I am currently tickled pink that two inmates—friends of mine—will take the entrance exam for CPEP this May. This is what success looks like for me.

Five years ago, I came up with this question: If you found yourself in hell, what would you do? Answer: You start work on an air conditioner! Well, you are in a man-made hell, so how do you start work on an AC? The answer is different for every one of us. For some, the answer is to transform their physical bodies by eating right and doing strenuous exercise. For others, the answer is to study their chosen religion, thereby improving their spiritual life. For still others, the answer is to further their education, earn a GED or a degree, and improve their intellectual abilities. They all have one goal in common: to magically transform the darkest, most depressing time of their lives into an adventure to proudly tell their grandchildren about.

Redemption after

As I sit between rounds on the heavy bag, I reflect on how my life has changed. After spending nearly three decades behind bars for a murder I committed in 1992, I was propelled back into society by executive decree.

Life in prison, to describe it softly, is life in an environment of systemic disquiet. So how do people gain a shot at redemption? To say it's not easy would be a gross understatement. For individuals with death-by-incarceration sentences, it is nearly impossible. Though they are rehabilitated, they are dwelling in a wait for the inevitable: a lonely death.

Our legislators have the opportunity to fix this broken system. Several criminal justice reform bills are slated for consideration this year. Again. The Elder Parole Bill and the Fair and Timely Parole Act are being sponsored by the Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP) campaign with the support of many other criminal justice advocacy groups. Many legislators are hesitant to spearhead progress or even back these bills, all while

worthy men and women are dying behind bars. I was one of the fortunate ones who didn't succumb to that horror.

Back in December of 1992, I committed a heinous crime. In a robbery gone wrong, I took the life of a jewelry store owner. My actions left families devastated and an entire community in mourning. I was convicted and sentenced to 50 years to life. For me, at 33, this amounted to a death-by-incarceration sentence. Not wanting to allow my prior actions to define me, I was determined to change.

More than 20 years into my incarceration, I realized that I was living a dead existence. Determined to change that, I made a conscious decision to atone for my past transgressions. I sought higher education and obtained two college degrees with a 4.0 GPA. I then used this foundation to write math programs for higher education institutions and rehabilitative programs for DOCCS, create new inmate organizations, and raise funds for nonprofit organizations as well as teach, tutor, and mentor fellow inmates.

That is part of the reason I was granted

Three Decades

Robert Ehrenberg

Layout by Troy White. Photo by Deehooks from Pexels:
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/colorful-balloons-released-in-the-sky-4788090>.

executive clemency this past August by the governor's office. I am one of only a few fortunate ones, the exclusive group that found "the needle in the haystack" and were allowed to return to society after decades of confinement. Now we apply our skills to benefit society. In a real-world setting, we work for campaigns, continue to educate ourselves and others, and work to bring change to a broken criminal justice system. But the reintegration process can be a difficult endeavor for many returning to their communities. "Out of the frying pan and into the fire" aptly applies to many transitioning back into society. Once again, I lucked out.

In the best-case scenario, released individuals have family to catch them as a safety net and resources to rely on. But what is to become of those who are less fortunate, who have lost their families over the course of their incarceration and who have no resources of their own, as was the case for me?

Hudson Link (HL) for Higher Education in Prison has sponsored a pilot program called New Beginnings, a "transitional house"

that provides a safe and nurturing environment for those in need who deserve a real opportunity for success upon release. As I sit in the office with HL Executive Director Sean Pica, he tells me, "We at New Beginnings take a hands-on approach." He then turns to me and adds, "So we can nurture people like yourself to make personal strides and 'be not a sole voice but a joining voice that has impact.'" I was surprised to learn that upon his release from prison many years ago, his friends and family had also made false promises to help him get situated.

Successful reintegration back into society is paramount for the newly paroled individual. New Beginnings is an example that works for both the individual and society. When provided with a fair chance at redemption, we can find evidence of its success, including Sean Pica and me. Expanding transitional housing availability will allow for real achievement and better communities. Sean and I both agree: "Walk a mile in our shoes and we'll help others walk one in theirs!"

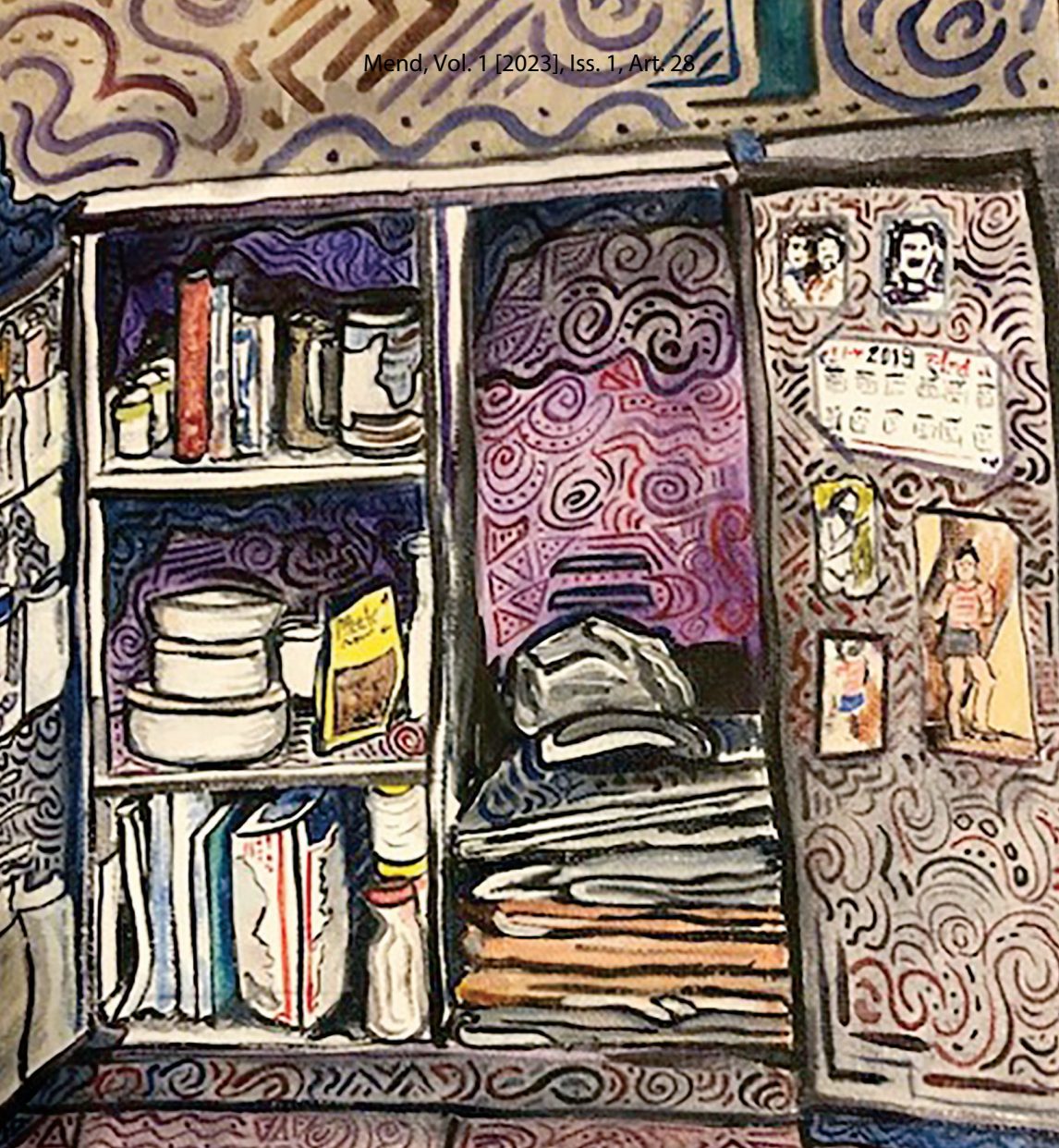


THE CARD

VICKI HICKS

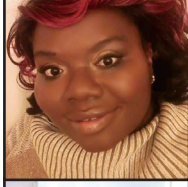
Would you judge me if you knew I lost my virginity in a shed when I was seventeen?
Would you judge me if you knew I became pregnant that day?
Would you judge me if you knew I waited until I was showing to tell Steven?
Would you judge me if you knew I didn't call him when I went into labor?
Would you judge me if you knew I didn't let him attend the delivery or cut the cord?
Would you judge me if you knew I didn't put his name on our son's birth certificate but gave him Steven's middle name?
Would you judge me if you knew I had Steven move to Florida with my family only to make him leave when my son was just eight months old?
Would you judge me if you knew I married another man when my son was four?
Would you judge me if you knew I amended my son's birth certificate, changing his middle and last name and placing my husband's name as his birth father?
Would you judge me if you knew I didn't tell my son who his biological father was until he was 31?
Would you judge me if you knew I only told my son because he needed our family medical history?
Would you judge me if you knew I received a card from Steven for my 51st birthday—even though he is now married?
Would you judge me if you knew I look forward to calling Steven every week just to hear him call me “baby girl”?
Would you judge me if you knew I secretly wanted him for myself?
Would you judge me if you knew we have plans to meet when I get out?
Would you judge me if you knew that my heart has belonged to Steven since I was fifteen?
Would you judge me if you knew I sent his wife a letter telling her that I love him but will not destroy their marriage?
Would you judge me if you knew I am not strong enough to resist him?

Layout by Troy White. Photo by Maycon Marmo from Pexels:
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/woman-pointing-index-finger-at-camera-4346014/>.



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EDITORS



Journal: Mend - Complete Issue, v. 1

Fátima Bings Martínez

Women & Gender Studies, Syracuse University

Born in Puerto Rico, Fátima came to Syracuse University with the goal of becoming a feminist writer. Since she was a little girl, she has aspired to find solutions to social problems and support the Latinx community. Her passion for writing in different genres continuously grows as she learns more. Fátima is also a member of CitrusTV.

Carly Cernek

Psychology, English and Textual Studies, Syracuse University

About to enter her third year at SU, Carly is passionate about putting her interests in psychology and English toward a career advocating for prison reform. In the future, she hopes to help provide mental health care to justice-impacted people.

Karl Deans

CUSE Center

Born and raised in the suburbs of Philadelphia in West Chester, PA, Karl holds a Bachelor of Social Work degree. His commitment to helping others has led him to hold numerous positions, most recently with the CUSE Center, the Recovery and Outreach Division of the Center for Community Alternatives.

Luke Hardy

Writing & Rhetoric; Minor: Sports Event Management, Syracuse University

Luke grew up in Boston, MA, and has always had a passion for sports, and sports writing in particular. When he's not engaged in academic pursuits, you will typically find him snowboarding down mountains in the winter or relaxing on a Cape Cod beach in the summer.

Brian T. Shaw

Center for Community Alternatives

Brian holds a BA in Social Studies from Bard College and a Master of Professional Studies degree from the New York Theological Seminary. He is devoted to enhancing the nutritional health and academic success of children. In the fall, he will attend Columbia University in pursuit of a Master of Public Health degree.

Cherise Hunter Titus

Center for Community Alternatives

Cherise earned her Associate's Degree in Criminal Justice from Bryant and Stratton College. She was a community activist for over 20 years and worked as an Outreach Coordinator for the Center for Community Alternatives' CUSE Center. We lost her on Valentine's Day 2023.

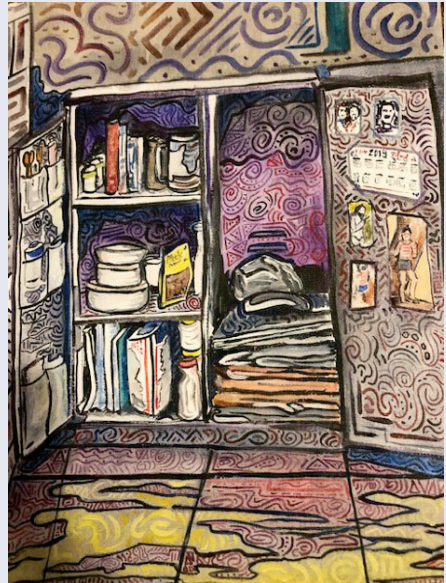
Troy White

Unchained

Troy is a graduate of SUNY New Paltz with a BS in Social Science. After his release following a 15-year sentence, he devoted over 27 years to working in the human services field in a variety of capacities and holds numerous certifications. He currently works for Unchained, an organization dedicated to dismantling the carceral state.

Opposite page: art by Brian Hindson.

ARTISTS



Brian Hindson is a contributing artist and writer with the Prison Journalism Project. His favorite styles of work are impressionism and pop art, which he particularly likes for its audacity. His favorite artist is Edward Hopper. His work has also been published by the Justice Arts Coalition. Brian is incarcerated in Texas. To learn more about his work, go to prisonjournalismproject.org/author/brian-hindson.



Hannah Landon is an artist from Southern California currently studying Illustration/Design Studies at Syracuse University.



Feimo Zhu is an illustrator who has always been interested in interdisciplinary research, and she enjoys using her illustration art to tell many beautiful, moving stories to audiences.
<https://feimoart.wordpress.com>.



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