

Walk In Those Shoes

September 2023 Newsletter – ISSUE 1



New Writing Contest

Prompt:

There are times we can't change our location, our possessions, our circumstances. Yet there is always an opportunity to 'Be Change'. What does 'being change' mean to you, whether taking personal responsibility or helping others; have you seen someone doing that – being change? Describe how that looked, and how it impacted you.

There is a school of thought that if we each choose to 'be change', collectively we can change systems. This prompt intends to inspire each of us to 'Be Change' and inspire hope for a better tomorrow.

"There are very few lanes for inmates to get schooled, encouraged, and published. I've reached out to many organizations over the years, and WITS has been the only one to give me a reason to purge the pains of my soul. Rehabilitation can be found in the nub of a pen. There might even be a drop of freedom there for those courageous enough to seek it."

– DeLaine Jones

Entry Details:

Only those who live in prison are eligible to participate, and we don't accept anything that has been previously published.

Submission is free – BUT, even if an entry doesn't win, we consider entry permission to publish and edit. Sometimes we get so many excellent entries, they can't all win, but they need to be shared.

Entries should be 1,000 words or less. Poetry is considered, as long as it is inspired by the prompt. Submissions can be handwritten.

PRIZES: First Place: **Blackstone Paralegal Program Sponsorship** | Second Place: \$50 | Third Place: \$25
DEADLINE: November 30, 2023. Decisions will be posted by approximately December 31, 2023.

MAILING ADDRESS:

Walk In Those Shoes
Writing Contest Entry
P.O. Box 70092
Henrico, Virginia 23255



Artist, Cerron T. Hooks

Your support encourages creative writing throughout prisons while raising awareness. To donate, go to www.walkinthoseshoes.com

Familiar Ties, by Carter Cooper

Nobody comes to prison to make friends, but it sort of happens. I mean, when you put similar people from common backgrounds in the same struggle, bonds are naturally formed. Especially after being isolated and alienated through extended periods of incarceration.

As humans, we are social beings, and we all desire those connections that provide us with a sense of understanding, support, and empathy. However, due to our incarceration, previously established relationships are often strained, broken, or nonexistent. So, it's easy to see how friendships are formed on the 'inside' out of need, dependence or as a means of survival.

Simply put, we all need someone, whether in here or out there. And it's easiest to relate with someone who understands you; if not you, at least your struggle. Someone like-minded and like-hearted.

The prison system is a world all its own, comprised of various institutions with multiple security levels, and built in the most remote locations; you can go decades without seeing the same person. So, it goes without saying the delight I felt when I ran into an old comrade I hadn't seen in more than ten years.

My homie, C-Lo, was a good friend from 'back-in-the-day', a walking memory of a former place in time, one when we were still 'young and thuggin'. Spending a few years together on a maximum security yard, we had once passed the majority of our time smokin' and jokin'. A gangster's way of coping.

Now, fast forward eleven years, we have both matured substantially, and very much in the same aspects. I believe we may have more in common now than we did back then. In hopes of rekindling our friendship, we immediately requested a cell reassignment so we could be cellies. Request granted, we began the late nights of reminiscing and catching up. It was during these conversations that I realized I didn't know C-Lo as well as I thought, and that we were actually 'running partners' more so than friends.

It was also during one of these late-night chats that I found out C-Lo had a "L" (life sentence). Discovering this unknown fact broke my heart, knowing my brother may not get another shot at freedom without a strong fight. Needless to say, he was equally surprised and disappointed to find out that I'd been home and returned to prison twice since we last saw each other, squandering two opportunities at a life he may never get a chance to see. That truth made me feel extremely small and careless.

Despite our circumstances, we found the reunion to be quite pleasant. I would entertain C-Lo with comical reentry stories and grandiose free-world exploits and endeavors, as he laughed and imagined himself transitioning into a totally new world. Sadly, after twenty-five years of incarceration, he had grown accustomed to living vicariously through others.

In turn, C-Lo told me a year's worth of war stories and prison news. Although we hadn't seen each other in all those years, we knew the same people, ran in the same circles. Much like its revolving doors, the prison's population was one big circulating mill.

Gossip and fishermen's tales weren't the only topics of discussion. We also built on more constructive things. Our dreams, our goals, our hopes for the future and the work we were putting in to achieve those things. This is when I broke the news of my most recent accomplishment, one I'm super proud of. I had become a published writer.

Familiar Ties, continued

After reading a few of my pieces, C-Lo seemed impressed and genuinely happy for me. Esteemed, I passed him a copy of *Beneath Our Numbers*, a collaborative memoir I was privileged enough to take part in. An avid reader, C-Lo wasted no time diving in. I knew he would enjoy it because these were our stories, told by people like us. However, I had no idea just how close to home the stories would reach.

One night, while doing some late-night writing, I heard a heavy sigh come from the top bunk.

“You good, cuz?” I asked.

“Yeah, just doing some reading.”

Not thinking much of it, I left C-Lo to his reading until I heard a second and equally burdensome huff of, “Damn.”

“What’s up?” I asked, a bit more concerned.

“My co-d in this book.”

C-Lo and I never spoke much about our cases or our co-defendants, and I didn’t personally know any of his; for that reason, I didn’t think much of it. So, ‘cool’ I thought.

“Oh, yeah, which author?”

There was an odd pause. “Nah, he in one of the stories.”

This really piqued my curiosity. I wondered which story, but judging by C-Lo’s tone, I had a funny feeling I already knew.

“Which one?”

“This one,” C-Lo said, passing me the open book.

There was a sting to being right, one I wish I could take back. I stared at the title page. *Coping With Conviction*, by Terry Robinson.

I knew the story well, read it twice. It was very moving and full of emotion. I liked it a lot, but I didn’t like the way it made me feel. The story was about two young men that had been sentenced to death row. Both were struggling to accept, face and fight the judgement deemed their fate. However, they formed an unlikely bond. Becoming friends, the two found common interests that helped them cope with their convictions.

Unfortunately, after some ups and downs, one of the young men succumbed to the weight of his burden and took his own life. That young brother was C-Lo’s co-defendant and childhood friend.

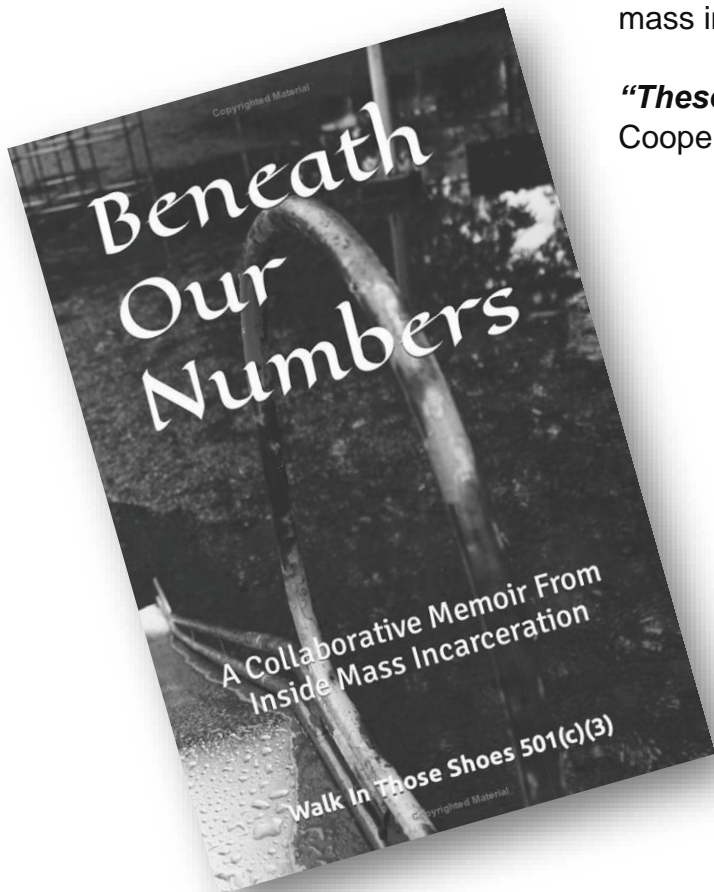
After sharing some of their personal story, as if I needed proof, C-Lo pulled out a host of paperwork and news clippings, showing me a picture of his dearly departed friend. They were young men who made a bad decision, which cost them tremendously.

The mood noticeably changed. The small cell suddenly felt tiny and tight. A harsh reality weighed heavily upon us, and in the grim silence, there was no need for words. I could read C-Lo’s every thought, feel his every emotion and shared his every sentiment. These were our stories; told by people like us. We too, were coping with conviction.

Available on Amazon

Beneath Our Numbers is a collaborative memoir from inside mass incarceration written by twenty-three WITS writers.

“These are our stories, told by people like us.” – Carter Cooper



WRITTEN BY

Jerrold Buford
Charles Butcher
Carter Cooper
Ashleigh Dye
Tony Enis
Ricardo Ferrell
Chiron Francis
Dushaan Gillum
John Green
John Johnson
Timothy Johnson
Delaine Jones
Joshua Kenyon
Robert Linton
Geoff Martin
Charles Mamou, Jr.
Tevin Nero
Resolute
Terry Robinson
Louis Singleton, Jr.
Phillip Vance Smith, II
George Wilkerson
Jarod Wesenberg

ALL PROCEEDS FROM SALE OF THE BOOK
FUND WITS PROGRAMS.

*“I first started writing for WITS in 2017 after reading a piece by John Green that resonated with me on the everyday struggles families face due to generational incarceration. I was moved not only by the message delivered so genuinely but the thoughtfulness of WITS to spread that message. It gave me the encouragement to tell my own story and the platform on which to do it. When I was elected as a board member and consulted with on equal footing as its more decorated committee members, that alone restored in me a sense of accomplishment and dignity. And the book, *Beneath Our Numbers*, was a milestone moment. Seeing my own writing featured in *Beneath Our Numbers* gave all the hardships in my life clarity. It shows that even the bad times are a part of the purpose; flaws have value also.”* – Terry Robinson



INCARCERATED DJ'S

106.5 – *The Tank*

In 2020, COVID wreaked havoc on the world. The pandemic caught us off guard, and we in prison were no less affected. It took a toll physically and mentally, testing our faith. Too many of our brothers and sisters lost their lives, while others became overwhelmed by the stress, losing faith altogether.

Yet, some managed to keep it all together, choosing to build during trying times, and the idea for a radio station was born. It all began three years ago with one man, Ramy Hozaifeh, who wanted to help out his immediate community during very tough times. Due to social distancing regulations, the population could not participate in religious services, school, or other programs. Hozaifeh began the work of bringing all of those services to people via radio.

It is now 2023. Not only is the radio station still up and running, it has succeeded in doing things no one expected. "The Tank", as it is known, went from a small-room radio show broadcasting for the Polunsky Unit in Livingston, Texas, to the subject of a BBC special and to creating several video podcasts watched in twelve states via tablets. The Tank has interviewed a vast array of influential and powerful people all travelling into a maximum-security prison in Texas just to be heard on The Tank.

And The Tank is getting bigger! It has had an impact on prison culture, offering prisoners a platform for rehabilitation – because the entire radio program is run by prisoners. Brothers are afforded the opportunity to express their natural talents, learning trades and skills they can use upon their release.

Currently, a second "Tank station" is being set up on the Mark W. Michael unit in Tennessee Colony, Texas, and I will be the station's DJ. In fact, as I pen this article, I am on the Polunsky Unit. I have gone through a ninety-day training program, three months of learning the ins and outs of not only the equipment and software, but also the do's and don'ts when it comes to interviewing and organizational structuring. It has been quite an experience.

Soon, I will be back on the Michael Unit to begin building another successful platform for those of us who are incarcerated. This is only the beginning! There is already preparation for another station, one run by the ladies at the Mountain View Unit in Texas.

What is more amazing than all these things is that Ramy started The Tank with little help. He used personal finances and a church volunteer here and there. It wasn't until people saw how successful The Tank became that an outside sponsor stepped in. Big shout outs to Gateway Church and KCBI radio. It was through their support and the donations of their church goers and listeners that the expansion is possible. I pray that this article and the many more to come serve to highlight what '**We In The System**' are capable of if given the chance. I hope it serves as motivation for us all to begin looking at prison as an opportunity to believe better. To think better. To feel better. And to ultimately do better! I would have never imagined that I, "*menace to society*", would be an incarcerated DJ and be responsible for all the ears that will listen; that I would be in a position to provide people with tools they can use in the construction of their new life.

...Sincerely Penned, *Jarod L. Wesenberg, Sr.* – BKA Kareem Tha I.R.E.A.M.

The Gallery



'His Power, Her Strength' - Jarod L. Wesenberg, Sr.

His Power, Her Strength

Despite all his ferociousness, in her embrace he melts like butter on a fire. Most people see the lion as king of the jungle and fail to see the lioness in all her majesty. She is the epitome of what God gave man when he created Eve to be his helper. The lion is one of my favorite animals, and I wanted to draw out of this piece, the likeness of man and woman, a man who loves and adores his woman, and she in return giving her man affection and peace of mind.

Woman was literally God's gift to man, a gift that is to be cherished.

PRISON FAMILIES ALLIANCE, 501C3 **Empowering Families Through Peer Support**

Prison Families Alliance (PFA) offers a variety of peer support meetings, both virtually and in person, making this resource available to anyone, anywhere. If your family member or loved one is incarcerated, you don't have to navigate the system and that experience alone. There is no cost to attending support meetings, and you will find people just like you, at all stages of involvement in the system. At any given support meeting, you will be surrounded by people just like you, and they don't just offer 'general' support meetings. There are meetings that are also focused, such as sibling support meetings, or children of those in prison meetings, or those whose loved ones are dealing with mental illness or other specific issues.



A calendar of available events, as well as resources, can be found at:
<https://prisonfamiliesalliance.org/>

RE-ENTRY – Just As Vital As The Sentence

By Terry Robinson

Reentry - likely the most important word to ever concern a prisoner, even more so than words like reform, redemption, and release. Reentry is oftentimes the deciding factor in a person's success or failure, and people trust the criminal justice system to do more than dish out penalties and capitalize on cheap labor. It is a merit system built on the concept of reconditioning thwarted minds and preparing those minds for life as civilians. An effective system would include restoring core principles to its residents before returning them to society along avenues where people can thrive and become contributors instead of suffering moral collapse.

I know firsthand what it's like to return home from prison and be ill-equipped to reenter society. At seventeen years old, I served two years for common law robbery. It was my first stint, and I thought my last. While in prison I took up various trades like brick masonry, plumbing, and accounting. Since participating in school or work was a requirement, I was merely passing time, but one class I excelled in was upholstery. I enjoyed transforming an unadorned wooden couch frame into a model that was completely embellished. It had taken my mother over a year to pay off our couch at home, now I could make her one. Divans. Drapes. Couch pillows. I was a natural on the sewing machine. It was the first time I envisioned working at a trade for a living, and upholstery was something I'd do for free.

Months later, I was granted work release, and began washing dishes at a pizza parlor. I relished the perks of leaving prison every day, but dish washing was nothing compared to sewing. My ambition was so high, once I gained my release, the world would need air shoes to trample on my dreams. My determination to succeed came down to one simple belief... all I had to do was get a job, and I would stay out of prison. It wasn't long before I walked into a sewing plant, my head held high and my upholstery certificate in hand, the one that read 'Department of Corrections' in bold letters, the same one that eventually drew a side-eye from the interviewee. The meeting went from a pleasant exchange to suddenly a curt dismissal. Needless to say, I didn't get the job. I was too embarrassed to try again.

This example is not about my being rejected for the job that day but how I went on to handle that rejection. I didn't understand how the State could secure me a job while I was in prison but did nothing to provide me with work on the outside. I began to view my prison accomplishments as a sham to elicit my good behavior. Feeling duped and discouraged, my certificates collecting dust in the family attic, I went back to selling dope.

What I didn't know at the time was that civilian life comes with many disappointments. Rejection and job loss is a part of the journey to succeed and no excuse to resort to poor judgment. I lacked the vital skills necessary to withstand the pressures of society. My reentry came at the termination of the prison sentence, yet my return was without adequate preparation. There was also a lack of resources that played a part in my ethical decline, resources like job fairs, transitional housing, and health care. It is not enough to release prisoners and expect them to navigate towards successful lives on their own. Rehabilitation is an ongoing process that is as much needed outside the prisons as it is within.

Our goal, as an evolving society, should be to ensure the well-being of those prisoners who return to that society daily. To do that, we must invest wholeheartedly in re-entry programs and expand methods to meet today's needs. When we do more to provide effective methods for prisoners to reenter into society, we do our part to reduce the rate of recidivism; but when we leave prisoners to make it in life on their ambition alone, we find, too often, we're faced with another word... repeat.