

# Walk In Those Shoes

October 2023 Newsletter – ISSUE 3



## Celestial Prisoners

By Michael E. Blackwell, Sr.

Upon arrival in prison, one is met by disdain and contempt from all sides. Among your new neighbors this may be because of the type of crime you committed, friends or family of the victims, the gang or people you associate with, the way you look, how you talk, or something as simple as how you breathe. Among the administrative staff, it is simply because you have committed a crime, and they have been vested with control over your life. And within this new world often exists a mentality of merciless anger, brutality, hatefulness and manipulation. Here, compassion can be scarce. However, in my thirty-three years of doing time, I have never been enriched like I have been from getting to know two gentlemen here - Richard Nelson and Ross Thornton. They defy the traditional prison mentality.

Ross Thronton is a 52-year-old man serving a life sentence. He has been working in the kitchen dish room for as long as I have known him, which has been about twelve years. He spends the first ten to twelve hours of each day overseeing the orderly running of all the equipment in the dish room, and he trains each person how to do their job with integrity, precision and a good attitude. I find Brother Ross extraordinary, not only because of his commitment to what many consider an unflattering job, but also for what he does every day before, during and after working his shift - serving the elderly population.

Brother Ross takes time throughout his day to pick up many of the elderly men's clothes, help them to and from the shower, clean their cells when needed, walk them to the chow hall, get their trays and eat with them. He sits on benches and provides companionship to a segment of the prison population that is often overlooked. He makes them feel valued, respected and loved. His prayer requests are always selfless. We have been praying over them for eight years and have never read one requesting a prayer for himself.

And then there is Brother Richard Nelson, a 79-year-old man also serving a life sentence. He works in the cellhouse and goes about his job of cleaning, restocking supplies (which consists of carrying a very large box of toilet paper holding 96 rolls), and also helping people in any way that they need. He is the type of man who will walk by, hear you expressing a need, and if he is able, he will fulfill it. It makes no difference whether he knows you or not. Race, age, religious affiliations, etc., none of it matters - other than what you need.

## AND THE WINNERS ARE:

**Michael E. Blackwell, Sr: 1<sup>st</sup> Place**

**Franklin Fuller: 2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

**Keith Erickson: 3<sup>rd</sup> Place**

*WITS wants to thank everyone who participated in this contest, which resulted in so many well-written submissions that many were held to be featured in newsletters over the next twelve months.*

**PLEASE SEE PAGE 2 FOR CURRENT  
CONTEST INFORMATION AND  
PROMPT.**



Artist, Cerron T. Hooks

[www.walkinthoseshoes.com](http://www.walkinthoseshoes.com)  
P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, Virginia 23255

I find Brother Nelson extraordinary not only because of his selflessness, but he also has the uncanny ability to make sure people know they are not forgotten. Brother Nelson can be seen on many days delivering birthday cards all over the cellhouse. He finds out people's birthdays, writes them down, and then he either draws or has cards drawn. The front covers consist of the good qualities God created in you, why you are valuable, and the personal nickname God has given you! Then he sends three months' worth of cards through his Incarcerated Individual Network to be signed by his friends as well as yours. How he finds out your birthday and who your friends are remains a mystery. All I know is, you come in from work or the yard and there is a birthday card on your bed.

These two men have taught me how to love unconditionally by the way they live. They never seek recognition. They never brag about anything they do or the help they give. They simply live their best prison life making prison life better for others. I would never have become friends with them for so many shallow reasons, but meeting them through the church helped me understand a particular scripture - Hebrews 13:12. "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."

Ross Thornton and Richard Nelson raised the bar for me. They became the human paradigms that elevated the way I serve. I see them as two people I entertained and learned they were Angels.



## CURRENT WRITING CONTEST DETAILS: WHAT DOES CHANGE LOOK LIKE?

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.

**ENTRY DETAILS:** Only those who live in prison are eligible to participate, & we don't accept anything that has been previously published. Submission is also permission to edit and post in future WITS projects.

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

### PRIZES:

First Place: Blackstone Paralegal Program Sponsorship – valued at \$880.00

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

# Even in Darkness, by Franklin Fuller

I'll be the first to admit I'm a sucka. I let others place their opinions and values in my head, then I go running with it. My dad and brother were and are in the trucking business (RIP Pops), so I naturally thought it would be my love too. So, what did I do? I studied everything trucking, from how to start a trucking LLC, to owning and operating, to onboarding. But unlike my dad and brother... I don't care much for trucking.

In 2012 I joined a rather radical organization, the Black Hebrew Israelites, and they hated whites, homosexuals, and women. What did my natural following-self do? I became a homophobic racist who somehow liked women but belittled them every chance I got. That very same year I joined Occupy Chicago and Occupy Dallas and marched with the LGBTQ population to stop, or try to stop, big stock trading companies from taking over the government.

And when I met Lukmon in a jail cell – it was no different. His values became my values, and his way with words became mine. You get the picture. Since I was a homosexual-hating radical racist, me sitting in the county jail facing two murder charges shouldn't surprise anyone. But here's the thing. I suffer from a 'personality disorder'. If you've ever watched the movie *Welcome To Me*, I'm the black male version of that. On top of that, when I was in the county jail, along came COVID-19, hell bent on wiping out half the population. Suddenly no one was allowed to be released, and just as suddenly, it was decided anyone without a seriously violent crime like mine could get a P.R. bond. Seventeen of us in my tank didn't meet that qualification. And it wasn't long before I started noticing things...

In Dallas County's North Tower there are tanks of 24 people with four cells that have six beds each. There were no assigned seats, so people slept where they were comfortable. Two days into the lockdown, I woke up to find I was the only man in a six-man cell! I gotta admit I'm a bit of a weirdo. I had a big afro going, I didn't talk to anyone, ever, and the medication I was on had me shuffling across the floor in circles all the time. So, no, not one soul wanted to share a room with me.

Then one day I heard, or overheard (ear hustled), a conversation between a youthful older guy and his lawyer about how crazy it was for him to be jailed for breaking into his own home. I gotta admit that was the dumbest reason I'd ever heard someone be arrested for. But it was a violation of his parole, so bail was denied and, like me, he had to just sit. His name was Lukmon, he was fifty-four years old – and he was staying on a top bunk! Eventually, he decided it was ridiculous for him to be climbing on a top bunk when I was living in a six-man cell by myself. At first one of his cellmates said, "Don't do it! That fool is *craazzzyyy*. All he do is twist his hair, walk in circles and talk to his self." Lukmon heeded the advice at first, but after a couple days he remembered – not one person in this world is *just* something.

I was watching Wendy that day, like I always did around lunchtime, when I turned around on a commercial and saw a bald, light-skinned guy curled up in my cell! Not only was I surprised, but I'd grown comfortable in my own cell. So, in hysterical laughter, Wendy ruined that day, I walked slowly to my cell and went to sleep hoping it would be normal again when I woke up.

I don't know how many days Lukmon and I sat in that cell in silence. But one day I had just gotten off the phone with the mother of my daughter, and it didn't go so well. I stood to watch the news and felt eyes on me. I turned to find Lukmon doing the 'contemplating man' walk behind me. When our eyes met, he asked, "What do they call you?" That should have been established on day one, I thought, before telling him my Hebrew name, Maleek. And right there it started. We took our conversation to the room, where we talked for the first time.

And Lukmon can talk. He amazed me with his optimism about prison. Having spent twenty-two years mostly on the Smith Unit as its Islamic Coordinator, he didn't mind the possibility that he'd be going back. "Why would I be bothered by going to prison? Prison is the second largest university, you know why? Because you got unlimited time to surround yourself with books! In fact, colleges should envy prison."

# Even in Darkness, continued

He proved his point by getting on the phone and ordering a bunch of books. He also told me about his man-cave back home, where he had a plastic tub full of handwritten notes from the books he'd studied. He prophesied, "That's gonna be you. People are gonna think you're crazy cause all you will do is study and write. They'll be intrigued by what I was intrigued by, and that's that you are an enigma."

I didn't know what 'enigma' meant, but I used my context clues to figure it out. That night, we didn't sleep. Lukmon was a conversationalist and only talked about what mattered to the listener. Through him, I saw history in a totally different way. I stopped hating and blaming white people for everything wrong when he told me, "White people have only been ruling the world for eleven hundred years. We ruled for four thousand. They did what they had to do to matter." I then wanted to know more.

And Lukmon also inspired me to write, though not long after I started, I got a visit from the county chaplain notifying me that my truck-driving, hard-working, crack addicted father had died. I didn't tell Lukmon, but he knew I wasn't 100%. But I'm never 100%, I'm weirdo Franklin. Two months later, I got news my Christian mother had died. I was numb, and just wanted to be on the next Upper Room Express. I gave up on writing and turned into a TV junkie. Wendy, the news and TMZ were my life, until one day an unlikely source gave me inspiration that would make Lukmon's prophesy of me doing time with a pen in my hand come to pass. I was walking by the television which seemed to be wobbling in a shipwreck kinda way. I turned to look and saw a large, black celebrity on TMZ twerking in a thong! The nerve! People told me she was a famous singer.

But it hit me! I didn't stop writing because I had two deaths in my immediate family. It was my excuse. I really stopped writing because I felt like Lukmon wanted to rate my writing. My insecurity used death as an excuse. But looking at that TV, I knew if this big ol' chick could find the courage to expose her tale-NT to the world, then my talent should be easy! So, I kept on writing.

But one night, not long after, I got cold feet and packed up my belongings and snuck out of the tank to keep Lukmon from reading my work. I regret that. Why? Because I guess somewhere inside of me, I still want Lukmon's approval on that first piece I wrote. I blew my shot, and Lizzo is still killin' it!

I've written over thirty unpublished books since then. I'm glad to say I'm no longer a homophobic, racist, Hebrew Israelite who hurt people and low-key hated women. I'm also proud to say I chose to follow someone that I may never see again, but I'll remember forever, the one person who wanted to prove that a crazy person isn't *just* a crazy person. Well... prove that and also prove he wasn't scared to sleep in a room with one. Lukmon once said, "A man that can't make up his bed can't make up his mind." I promise you that my bed is made right now. I'm ready to publish.

*Your support encourages creative writing throughout prisons, while also providing an avenue for that writing to be accessible to readers who might not have direct contact with the justice system and mass incarceration.*

*By allowing readers to consider the experiences of those often stereotyped, the public can have a better understanding when considering policies & reform.*

To donate to WITS, go to [www.walkinthoseshoes.com](http://www.walkinthoseshoes.com).



# Loving Delta

By Keith Erickson

Throughout much of my life I struggled with the concept of what “love” is. From an early age the very people that were supposed to love and protect me harmed me or put themselves ahead of my wellbeing. To conceal the pain of isolation, I became a master of disguise, wearing masks to fit in with others. Sadly, I found my place drowning in an abyss of other broken souls much like myself... after thirty-five years of incarceration, I had forgotten what *love* actually was. I managed to survive a life of imprisonment by not feeling my connection to the humanity around me.

Then the prison I am housed at announced they would be bringing a Service Dog Training Program to the facility. I hadn't seen nor touched a dog in over two decades, nor had I ever had a dog of my own growing up, though I envied the boys in my neighborhood who did. But, I was excited and wanted to be a part of something that felt outside of prison, something that had nothing to do with the coldness of concrete walls and steel doors. I simply wanted to *feel* again after years of hiding behind pain.

With the help of the facility Captain, I was able to name the dog I was assigned, a twelve-week-old yellow Labrador Retriever. ‘Delta’ seemed fitting, and shortly after he would become the face of the dog program here on D-facility. The moment I held him in my arms I began to feel things I had been longing to feel but could not say out loud. The walls, the very walls that kept me from connecting with others around me, began to crumble.

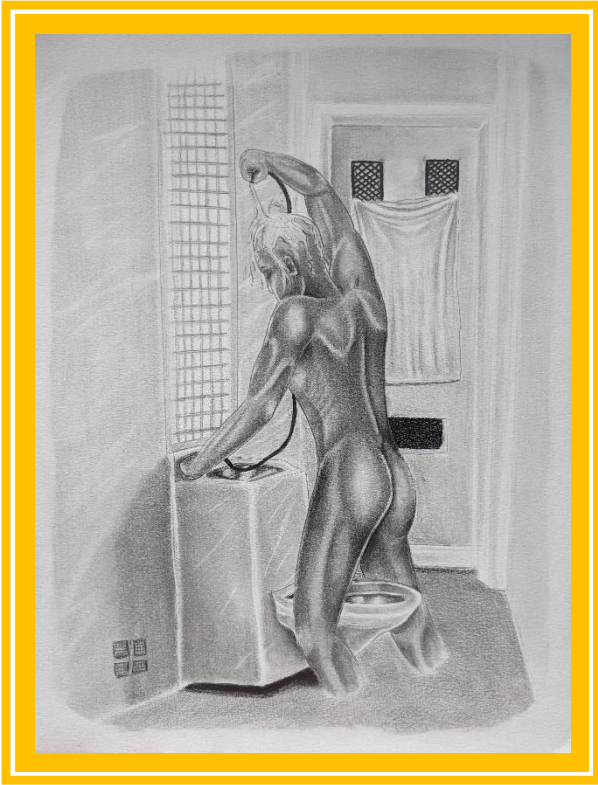
I sat in my prison cell that first night with tears streaming down my face. Here I was, convicted of first degree murder for taking the life of another human being, now responsible for the wellbeing of this amazing creature. I was instantly humbled by the experience and what was to come in the three years that followed.

Delta became one of the top Warrior Support Dogs in the program, and through our time together he taught me how to love and be loved. The men who took this journey alongside me, raising dogs of their own to be of service to veterans and first responders in the community suffering from PTSD, allowed me to see a side of them that most men continue to hide within these walls. In the end, I gained a family of men that showed their love, kindness, trust, and patience with me as their team leader, as well as their commitment to love their dogs.

My fondest memories, despite being bittersweet, were of the dogs going out into the community following graduation. Together, we watched like proud parents as a dog would graduate, and together, we hugged and cried, no longer able to hide our emotions from one another. If that is not love, love for self and another human being, I don't think I will ever experience it while incarcerated.

Delta now resides with a wonderful service vet couple where he has lived since graduating a year and a half ago. I still carry with me all the things he taught me, most of all how to love others with acts of kindness, rather than deprive myself of the beautiful opportunities that come with being a part of something remarkable in another person's life. My greatest reward is that I can actually *feel* again... and I'm not afraid to do so.

# The Gallery



'A Texas Bird Bath' - Juan Raul Ramirez

## A Texas Bird Bath

The drawing captures a real-life moment for some inmates living in solitary confinement in Texas who go to great lengths when daily showers are not afforded to them.

The makeshift hose that acts as a shower head is constructed out of nothing more than the hollow tubing from a coax cable purchased from the commissary.

To shower in their solitary cell, an individual can stand facing the sink, positioned so the water can flow into the toilet, so that the cell's floor doesn't get flooded.

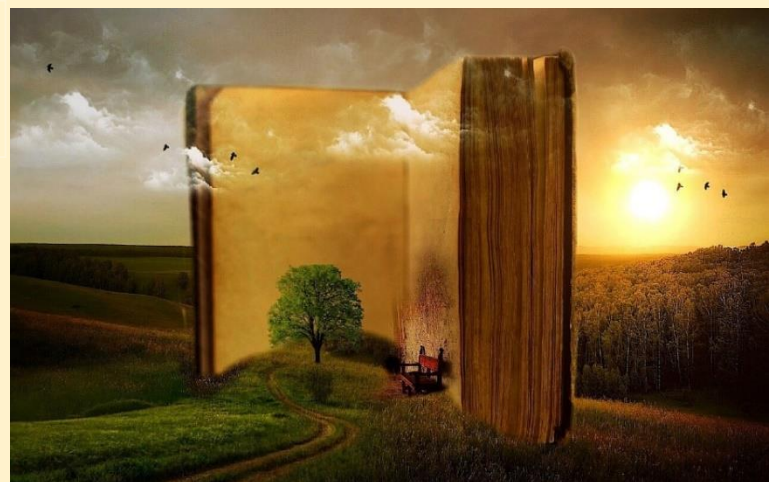
The procedure isn't ideal, but nothing about solitary confinement is, and often, you gotta do what you gotta do. - *narrative by Charles Mamou*

If you would like to donate art for use in *The Gallery*, please mail to P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, VA 23255 for consideration & include a brief narrative about what inspired the piece.

## A Word From WITS' Arizona Book Club on *Girl Forgotten*, by Karin Slaughter

"I was completely thrown off by the ending... the author doesn't let you pigeonhole her... she has you guessing all the way up to the last few pages." - *Victor McKaney*

"Yes, I would read (the author) again. The writing was interesting, she pulled you in from the start... well written... made it interesting with many twists and turns." - *Carilos Siqala*



# Model Prisoner

By Terry Robinson

Prisons can be a hard place to change for the better because many of those around you seek to impede your growth. We all know some in-your-face individuals who are loud, confrontational and always have something to prove; people whose answer to all life's problems is with the swing of their fists, caught up in the alpha male complex. People like that can thrive in prison, a place that is structured to incite conflict and violence. It's a place where bad equates to good and good is considered weak, so either you're really mean to people, or you're thought to be a pushover.

But then there's the 'model prisoner' who averts the petty squabbles and excels despite prison's challenges. Those are the ones who truly exude redeemable qualities and exemplify monumental growth. Being a model prisoner is a test of one's commitment and persistence to stay the course. So, is being the model prisoner a role to aspire to, or a concept to affect more problems?

I recently argued with a man here on NC Death Row over an issue too frivolous to recount, yet the next morning he showed up at my cell door mad. These are the sort of unsolicited encounters that are the real infamy of prisons, disputes that stem from the most trivial matters in a place where diplomacy is minimal. An argument can spark from something as harmless as an involuntary glance with resulting consequences that are severe, sometimes fatal. Lapse in communication along with the need for a 'macho' image can be the components of much of prison's violence, the hostility a product of the stale existence woven into the fabric of prison. People become deprived of social connecting skills until their ability to compromise suffers. In some cases, people have lived in prison longer than they were civilians, and often enough, we forget how to be civil.

As my neighbor stood at my door flinging muddy insults that morning, I felt helpless to disengage. Some things you can let slide, others you can't, and when that happens it's time to fight. I fought in other prisons before. I've fought here on Death Row. Those times for me have passed. Today I am focused on salvaging humanity in prisons. My only fight is to overturn my wrongful conviction. I have worked hard to be different, hosting speaking engagements, attending programs, and becoming a writer in an effort to work on myself. And now it was all being threatened by the typical prison bully, and I was seconds away from handing over the fate of my near future.

We argued until my chest tightened, and my nose flared, as my every retort fueled the fire. I was being pulled back into a mindset I've long abandoned; I no longer believe in violence. And I was reminded that, in that moment, the person I was arguing with had issues of his own he was dealing with, a history I can know nothing about, and I recognized my own role in enabling the dispute. Sometimes the most courageous thing one can do in prison is to walk away from a fight. I did just that - I walked away, but I didn't feel courageous. I felt like I'd dropped my dignity at his feet, but to further engage meant I was willing to jeopardize everything I'd worked hard for... next to that, walking away was a small price to pay.

In that moment I thought of the model prisoner and what that term truly entails. Is it a phrase coined by the State to subjugate prisoners? Is it a hindrance more than it is prevention? Surely, no prisoner would take kindly to being labeled a 'model prisoner' because of the historically negative connotation. Model prisoner is a phrase that is likely frowned upon in every prison across the nation, drawing reference to the derogatory 'Uncle Tom'. And yet the model prisoner does exist, if not in name, then in the actions of one to effect positive change. It is the person who channels their prison experience into a purpose to enhance theirs and other people's lives. Being a model prisoner doesn't mean someone is a sellout or snitch; it could just mean that someone is tired of coming to prison.

My recent situation made me think of the so-called model prisoner and the challenges they endure to rise above the status quo. How does one disarm and deescalate hostile encounters? To those prisoners who are making the push toward living positive lives while continuously staring down adversity - much respect. Their journey through the prison system is without comparison as they try to do good in a place where goodness is often rejected.

I would never call someone a model prisoner because of the attached stigma, although the term is not meant to be an accolade but more so recognizes success over prison struggles. It means that some prisoners do not have to bend to prison policy but make prison work for them, and if a person can make it through prison on goodness and prosperity then they can make it anywhere in life.

I can only hope to prosper in my prison experience but I'm afraid I'll fail because I am who I am. I am cuts and scrapes and broken spirits, but I'm also a work in progress. I am by no means a model prisoner, just someone who chooses to discontinue perpetuating my faults...