

Walk In Those Shoes

November 2023 Newsletter – ISSUE 4



I Found Joy In The Lion's Den

By Carter Cooper

Daily, I am faced with various degrees of hatred and hostility. Anger and aggression are as normal a salutation as any, while mean mugs, ice grills, and screw faces are merely grotesque masks worn to disguise the fragility of the tormented souls hidden beneath. Tension remains tangible and paired with an air of animosity and malice. The gift of new life seems more so burden than blessing when you awake another morning trapped in a lion's den.

Here, in society's pit of despair are cast the wretched, forlorn, and forsaken, thirsting for hope, longing for love. Time here is measured by dry cries and tears of sand captured in a bottomless hourglass. Although surrounded by men, I stand alone in corridors littered with broken spirits, blackened hearts, and tarnished dreams. This is what life is like, trapped in a lion's den.

To escape my fate, I seek retreat in a weekly bible study led by a courageous volunteer from the outside, one willing to wade through suffering and sorrow bearing the weight of our collective anguish just to deliver 'the good news'. Our mighty messenger is a beautiful, daintily built, 76-year-old motherly woman named Ms. Joyce. This tiny five-foot giant slayer marches in every Tuesday armed with a welcoming smile, warm eyes, and the word of God.

It is here, in the midst of this gentle spirit, that I am able to find rest as she sings, teaches and ministers from her well of wisdom and experience. More often than not, this is the most peaceful place within this morbidly wrought dungeon. Sometimes I wonder why she even visits such a sordid place, surrounded by murderers, thieves, conmen and worse. Then I remember, its her 'Christian duty'. I am also certain she could serve that duty elsewhere – schools, hospitals, etc. – yet, Ms. Joyce finds it in her heart to remember some of society's least mentionable, those bound in prison.

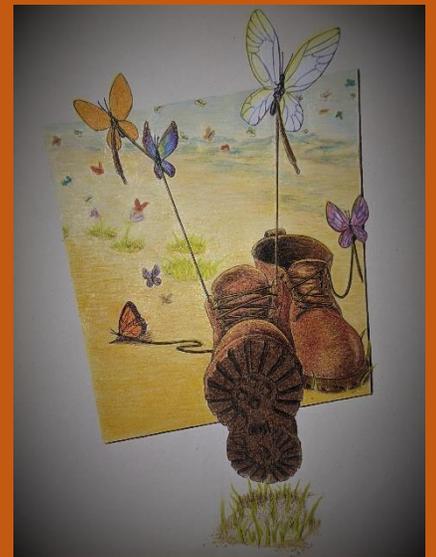
At times, I watch in awe as she listens intently to the stories, problems and fears of men who have committed some of the most heinous acts

U.S. PRISONS

The U.S. prison population includes 200,000 people who won't outlive their sentence, some of whom did not commit a crime of violence or who were sentenced as children.

*The United States incarcerates more people to death in prison than any other country in the world.**

*Baumgartner, F., Daniely, T., Huang, K., Johnson, S., Love, A., May, L., . . . Washington, K. (2021). Throwing away the key: The unintended consequences of "tough-on-crime" laws. Perspectives on Politics, 19(4), 1233-1246. doi:10.1017/S153759272100164X



Artist, Cerron T. Hooks

www.walkinthoseshoes.com
P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, Virginia 23255

imaginable. Then, without judgement, she gives her best motherly and spiritual advice, hoping to comfort and correct those aching and misguided souls.

And, yes, there are times when the dubious enter the midst, bringing mischievous distractions, whether intentional or not. But Ms. Joyce lends them the same respectful, sincere ear and advice. Sometimes, she also lends a sweet, sugar-coated scolding that brings a sense of humility to the simple and silly.

My favorite memory of Ms. Joyce took place one day before closing a study group. She began singing, "I get joy when I think about... what He's done for me..."

After singing through the chorus by herself, she stopped and said, "Okay, guys, now your turn."

Once again, Ms. Joyce began singing, but unfortunately, she was still all on her own; not a soul joined in. Ms. Joyce stopped again and said, "Okay, guys, now your turn."

The words were spoken a bit more stern; sort of motherly plea and demand. Then Ms. Joyce cranked up again, "I get joy when I think about... what He's done for me..."

This time she got her results. There was no way I could disappoint Ms. Joyce, so I joined in; and when I looked around, to my surprise, almost twenty cold, hardened criminals were either singing or attempting to sing about the joy they had found.

A photograph of a lion with a thick, golden-brown mane, looking out from a stone enclosure. The lion is positioned on the left side of the frame, facing left. The background is a dark, textured wall.

I'd like to thank all the volunteers who contribute their time and service to incarcerated men and women, no matter your religious preference, ministry, mission, or movement... Thank you for not forgetting your fellow man and woman living in these dismal crypts. Thank you for your love and support. You are greatly appreciated.

And to those experiencing any form of imprisonment, whether mental, spiritual or physical, you are never alone. There is hope. There is love. I know because I found joy in the Lion's Den.

- Carter Cooper



WITS WRITING CONTEST

LAST CALL!

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

***PRISONER EXPRESS*, though not affiliated with WITS, is an organization that supports creativity and also offers a newsletter, FREE of charge, to people who live in prisons in the U.S.**

Prisoner Express newsletters are issued twice a year and are filled with opportunities and programs that encourage creative expression and education. Each newsletter offers information on how to enroll and participate in the various programs they offer.

Have a loved one sign you up at:

<https://prisonerexpress.org/programs/newsletter/enrollment/>

Or write to Prisoner Express directly at:

CTA / Durland Alternatives Library

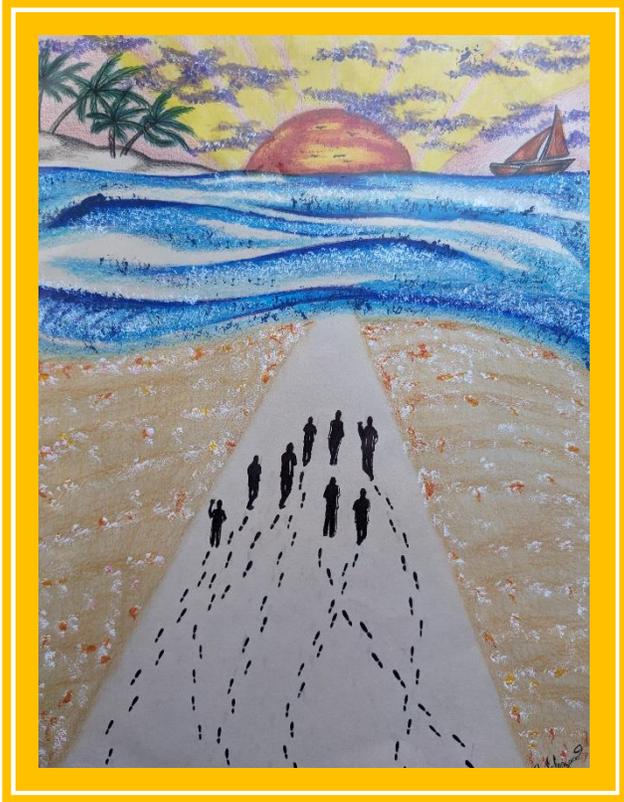
Prisoner Express

PO Box #6556

Ithaca, NY 14851



The Gallery



'The Chosen Ones' – Jose L. Solorzano

The Chosen Ones

This piece was created by Jose L. Solorzano and is the cover art for a book by the same name that is being released later in 2023.

Working with Ms. Bertha S. Lopez at Pleasant Valley State Prison in California, eight men came together to share their stories. Ms. Lopez has always given a message of hope and encouragement during her career in the prison system, and this art as well as the soon to be released book are a reflection of what hope and encouragement can accomplish.

The eight men are walking to freedom, leaving their footprints in the sand.

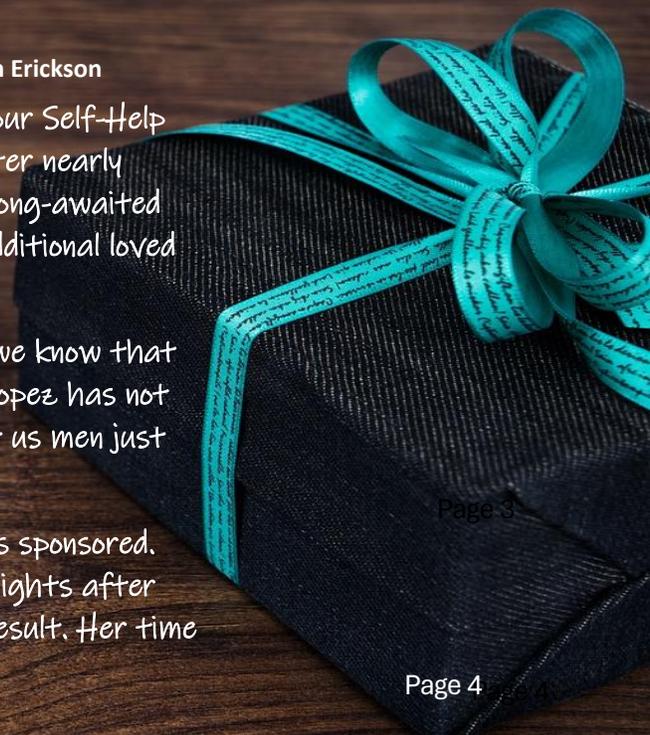
If you would like to donate art for use in *The Gallery*, please mail to P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, VA 23255 for consideration & include a brief narrative about what inspired the piece.

The Gift of Compassion, by Keith Erickson

Having to say "Goodbye" to the woman who has sponsored many of our Self-Help groups here at Pleasant Valley State Prison will be bittersweet. After nearly three decades, Mrs. Bertha Lopez will be entering retirement, the long-awaited chapter of her life that will give her time with grandchildren and additional loved ones.

Despite knowing her departure will be a treasured gift for others, we know that her shoes will be next to impossible to fill here on our facility. Mrs. Lopez has not only sponsored our groups, but has done it in a way that has taught us men just what it means to show others compassion.

I am blessed to have facilitated many of the groups Mrs. Lopez has sponsored. With her guidance, encouragement, and willingness to stay the long nights after work with us, and we have discovered things about ourselves as a result. Her time here at Pleasant Valley State Prison will forever be a cornerstone.



Model Matters: Empowering Parents in Prisons

By Terry Robinson

Prison life is a daily challenge plagued with demoralizing circumstances. It is a fight to keep one's dignity intact. Being told when to eat, sleep, stand, and move, along with a stream of other rules and restrictions, can take its toll on one's confidence and pride. Just the other day a C/O working Death Row for the first time felt it necessary to blast me for being late - "*I called last call two minutes ago!*" he barked, his scolding me a clear show of force.

And though I was late, being chastised by someone you've just met can be the most demoralizing experience ever; yet I clinched my teeth to suppress the urge to cuss him out since speaking up for yourself here is an infraction. There are many other challenges to withstand prison life, like the tendency to encounter violence. Fights and stabbings are a growing ambition in a place where hurt people not only just hurt people but will readily kill. Then there's the diversion of resources and deliberate efforts to defer positive change, fulfilling a systemic agenda to populate institutions since prison reform is counterproductive to the business of prisons.

The blaring 'wake up' call at dawn to 'lights out' at night are among the myriad of obstacles prisoners face every day, but the more pressing issue for me would have to be the challenge of being a parent.

Parenting methods are not common practice in prisons mainly because no one comes to prison to be parented. The prison dynamic is about projecting a rugged exterior so being a loving parent can pose complications. However, there are millions of prisoners today who are parents and spend decades without seeing their children, a generational dysfunction in itself, as it creates complications that transcend prison back to the communities. For one, prison stints do not allow for the consistency needed in children's lives to impart on them structure and guidance. One fifteen-minute phone call or 2-hour weekly visit is insufficient time to build a genuine connection. Then there are the ways in which we conduct ourselves in an environment where poor behavior is often encouraged and the realization that what matters more than our affection in the presence of our kids is how we model ourselves when they're nowhere around.

I have two adult sons with whom I frequently engage by phone, and each time I feel it's a conscientious struggle. I haven't seen my boys in over 15 years, enough time gone by for anyone to become a stranger. My sons aren't strangers to me though because the idea of them is recognizable enough, and yet I'm talking with two young men I hardly know, so I struggle to feel like I'm their father.

I find I mostly placate to appease them. Any advice I give feels like I'm imposing. I don't know how to show them what it is to be a good father without feeling like the hypocrite who's on Death Row. Still, I wake up every day and think '*how can I be a better example for my sons,*' and it starts with invoking the responsibility of a father as I am reminded that every thing I do will impact them. I practice a bit more diplomacy and conflict resolve; being a hothead is for studs, not fathers. I don't want my sons caught up in violent situations so I've learned to avoid them myself. I do my best to stay constructive and set aside the hustler mentality because I want my boys to know the value of hard and decent work. I am striving to change in all the ways I know how in hopes of being a better dad, but sometimes I wonder if it's enough.

There is a long-standing crisis of parents occupying prisons that plays its part to fuel recidivism. Children are more likely to follow in the paths of their parents because, primarily, we are their greatest influence. Everyone makes mistakes but prison terms do not excuse us from our parental obligations, as often we have the most to give to our kids. I give to my sons my daily commitments and worldly aspirations. I give to them my undying efforts in the dark, the same as my devotion in the light; I do this because I need to be able to look them in the face someday and have them know I tried. My hope is that other parents, fathers and mothers in prison, will undertake the responsibility to live their lives according to what is productive to their children because parenting is more than a boisterous declaration validating past experiences, being a parent is a privilege.