

Walk In Those Shoes

January 2024 Newsletter – ISSUE 6



Ambassadors of Change

From the Trash Heap to Recycled & Repurposed

By Timothy Johnson

Society considers prisons the trash heaps of humanity. However, these sprawling sites become recycling centers instead of dumps when those considered disposable climb from the heap completely remade and repurposed. These transformed individuals, these Ambassadors of Change, provide the model for other recycling projects.

A line from the 1993 film, *A Bronx Tale*, summarized the tales of many in prison - "The saddest thing in life is wasted talent." Prisons overflow with this distinct form of sadness – individuals with talent wasted by destructive choices.

Although prisons teem with wasted talent, a segment rises above the waste of their past and circumstances. Thrown away like garbage in a landfill that stretches beyond the horizon, these remarkable individuals refuse to remain wasted. They dedicate themselves to radical change, to transformation so incredible that they build a life of impressive accomplishments and positive impact, including inspiring others in prison to dedicate themselves to this reclamation project. Often, these ambassadors come from a subgroup of prison – those serving a sentence of life without parole, lifers like Phil, Kwame, and Barry.

Phil was released from prison without a means of support – no home, money, education, job, trade, clothes or food. The determination to never return to prison was quickly extinguished by the reality of survival. He accepted the only offer extended, the opportunity to sell drugs to make money to eat and live. A few months and a botched drug deal later, Phil was back in prison.

Initially, returning to prison with a life sentence made Phil think his life was over, change was pointless. Yet, despite the lack of any meaningful extrinsic incentives, a love of writing motivated him to become self-educated as he studied and strived to hone the craft. The writing pursuit and corresponding education produced a whole-person maturation.

Writer Prompt of The Day

Describe a memorable experience that changed your perspective on life.

WITS Writer Tip:

Talkers make the best writers. Anyone who has ever told a 'war story' in prison is a writer waiting to happen.

Avoid 'trying' to write; rather, tell a story on paper, the same way you would in a conversation.

If you would like to submit your writing for consideration on our website at www.walkinthoseshoes.com or for inclusion in upcoming newsletters, please submit only unpublished work to:

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Artist, Cerron T. Hooks

Phil has written dozens of books and numerous journalistic articles, been published in two legal journals, and drafted a legislative mass incarceration reform proposal and bill for North Carolina that combats institutional violence. Currently editor of *The Nash News*, he has been featured in an episode of *Criminal* podcast regarding prison newspapers. He spends his time writing to advocate for reform and positively influence his community. The reform bill he drafted has motivated numerous lifers to live the changed life and inspired many in prison to be their own advocates for reform.

Kwame became a writer and trailblazer while incarcerated. Some would label him a product of his environment – a minority youth raised in an inner-city neighborhood plagued by poverty, drugs, and crime, who ends up in prison. But that episode is not the entire story; it's just the opening scene.

Kwame wrote one of the pioneering books in the urban fiction genre. Using stories of the streets familiar to him, he has written stories and created characters that helped others from a similar background feel understood and forced many who could not previously identify with the struggle of the inner-city better understand and empathize with the systemic challenges.

He has now become a screenplay writer and movie producer. Also, he created and taught *The Art of Storytelling*, a creative writing class for the prison population, seeming discernibly like the NYU professor he could have been. Kwame – author, producer, Ambassador of Change – paved a path for others in prison to enter the urban fiction genre. He has created a legacy of possibility and a culture of writing that has been a catalyst for numerous others to change.

Barry overcame a struggle with alcohol and substance use through a 12-step program. He was building a career as a project manager for a construction company – until he decided he had come far enough to have one drink. One drink turned into a pitcher, into several pitchers. That night of drinking ended up with a man dead after a neighborhood friend called for help. The friend, who landed the fatal blows, got fifteen years. Barry, who pleaded with his friend to stop the beating, got LWOP.

Barry could have become bitter. Instead, he spent nearly twenty years helping others – a peer counselor in a substance abuse program, dog trainer, and now a Field Minister. He spends most of his time doing one-on-one counseling, helping guys work through problematic emotions, substance abuse, and grief by applying cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) principles. He also teaches *Thinking For a Change*, a CBT class that emphasizes 'Thinking Controls Behavior'.

Barry is fulfilling his talent by becoming the counselor his neighbors need. The guys he has helped change convince others to change, to use CBT to face their troubles. The counselees, who overcome explosive anger, addiction, depression, anxiety, have become Ambassadors of Change.

These Ambassadors of Change prove the inherent potential for change within every person, including every incarcerated individual. These ambassadors light the darkness of prisons as beacons of hope to the incarcerated and beacons of possibility to society, to the many who think a person who lands on the trash heap can be only waste.

So, when people view the story of the young adult who robbed someone or even took a life - instead of thinking, '*Throw them on the trash heap*,' remember these Ambassadors of Change. These recycled and repurposed individuals have transformed themselves and their life; now they influence others to change.

When society decides to make prisons about rehabilitation, the solution is simple – Reward the Ambassadors of Change and those who follow their path of transformation with freedom. These transformed individuals will certainly succeed after release and will continue to positively impact their communities. And the substantial incentive of freedom will exponentially increase the numbers who become Ambassadors of Change. The recidivism rate will plummet, but the most important benefit will be that the majority released from prison will not just stay out but live effectively because they have joined the assembly of Ambassadors of Change.

Timothy Johnson is the First Place Winner of our writing contest and recipient of a Blackstone Scholarship.

Change

By Dan Cleary

For the past thirteen years, I have been an inmate. I was sentenced to incarceration, but the state has no educational opportunities beyond earning a GED and no programs beyond occasional access to the yard. The prison administrators no longer call us 'inmates' or 'convicts', preferring 'individual in custody'. The distinction matters not, as I remain confined.

I grew up in an abusive home, so largely kept to myself out of embarrassment and shame, but there were four occasions where I thought hope for *change* was possible. The first time, a customer at a grocery store reported to police that my stepfather had chased me around the parking lot while yelling threats at me. When officers arrived at our home the following day, my mother instructed me to lie. The officers reluctantly left. I silently hoped they knew they had been lied to and would return. They did not.

The second time, a neighbor called police after seeing the results of the latest beating, wherein I had been punched and kicked for sticking up for my mother. When the officers arrived, one of them opined that I had deserved it.

The third time was in high school English class. I wrote an essay about the abuse at home by my stepfather. For that effort, I was given a grade and a note complimenting me on my descriptive writing.

The fourth time, during a period of separation between my mother and stepfather, he appeared at our home in the middle of the night, drunk. I was in my bedroom when I heard him strike her. She pleaded with him to leave, but when he refused to do so, I stormed into the living room and grabbed a sword off the fireplace mantle. It was only after I threatened to kill him with his sword that he left our home. Weeks later, my mother allowed him to move back in. It became clear to me that my home life would never change.

After high school graduation, I joined the military, longing to escape my home. I did so without telling anybody. It quickly became clear that I was unprepared to be out on my own. I busied myself with alcohol, sex and work. And after my contract was fulfilled with the U.S. Navy, I busied myself with much of the same; just a little less alcohol and sex, and a lot more work.

I have had role models, good and bad, though more bad than good. Apparently, that describes me as well – more bad than good. Ancestors on my mother's side founded a town when they arrived in the U.S. and settled in Pennsylvania. On my father's side, ancestors lived in a castle they built on the banks of the Rhine River in Europe. My ancestors built things. I have not.

I have lost my one true love, my five kids (and possibly others), a wife and two houses; people and material things. One may argue that I have also lost my freedom. I disagree. My freedom was not lost, as I don't feel it was mine to begin with. I was physically trapped by my upbringing, my vain attempts to 'succeed' or change my circumstances and now, by four tall walls decorated with razor wire. I was mentally trapped by the walls my ears are attached to. That has been the problem all along. For change to occur, it must start there.

Time on this earth has been a complete waste; I have contributed nothing. The world would have been a better place without me in it. Today, and for the past thirteen years, my life has consisted of circumstances described by Beth Dutton in the Yellowstone television series: "Trained to sit. Trained to stand. Trained to eat. And when all you look forward to is the fish fry Friday, you are just waiting to die."

And now I realize I have been running from, rather than *being* change. To be change, I must not blame the prison administrators for their failures as I perceive them; nor blame the police, teachers, or my mother for theirs. I must not blame myself for abandoning my family when I joined the military, or for the lack of communication to promote and maintain healthy relationships with others. And I must not blame others for not being good role models.

To be change, I must accept that I had not previously possessed the strength that was needed to ask for help from teachers, police, or other family members, directly. I must also accept that I did not have good role models whom to admire, to learn from, and to model the type of person I wanted to be after. I had chosen, consciously or subconsciously, to be like the others. To be change, I must accept all of these things, and more.

Learning and accepting my past, as well as acknowledging that without said past, I would not be who I am today, will lead to change. To being change. Because to be change, I must not allow the past to define my present or future; the circumstances, not the person. I will have the strength to face change. I will be change.

The Gallery



'The Awakening' – Keith Erickson

'The Awakening'

by Keith Erickson

Keith Erickson is a WITS writer and also an artist. Keith shared this drawing shortly after hearing about The Awakening Exchange, a platform envisioned and brought to life by Steven Matthew Clark, a resident of Maine State Prison. The Awakening Exchange is an interactive online platform, bringing together individuals across the globe for events, workshops and podcasts to connect and share ideas and perspectives often related to criminal justice reform, inspiring personal as well as collective and societal transformation. The Awakening Exchange offers a variety of ways to participate, from podcasts to interactive monthly sessions – and it is **all facilitated from within a maximum security prison in Maine.**

For more information on the next Awakening event and to register, go to:

<https://awakeningexchange.sutra.co/space/vvzwth/register>

At a recent Awakening podcast, Steven spoke with two members of Link-Boyz, musical artists who began their collaboration while they lived in prison. You can see the episode here, as well as hear their personal stories and music:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/Tpgco7DUkac?si=3tmj7IKc9WJGG4YX>

Link-Boyz uses Hip Hop to deliver their message and ministry. Each is a leader for Celebrate Recovery, supporting others and being supported. The group's mission and vision is to *Share the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the platform of Christian Hip Hop, that the Holy Spirit will radically save, transform, and set people's hearts on fire, for furthering the Kingdom of God.*



My life has changed many times over the past thirteen years. Becoming incarcerated was a major change for me. Growing up I had never known anyone who had been to jail or prison. The concept was one I saw only on television. I had no idea what was about to happen in my small corner of the world. And just as I adjusted to the jail, my life changed again, and I was transferred to prison. This is what I discovered about prison: the only consistency is inconsistency. I had to accept early on that change was going to be a part of my life. What I didn't realize was that my mind was changing as well.

Becoming incarcerated at seventeen meant that I was literally growing up in prison. I learned how to be a woman from those around me. At first, the lessons I learned weren't always positive. I learned how to effectively stay on the yard for hours just to see my girlfriend. I learned how to steal food from the chow hall, and I learned that sometimes you have to fight.

But then something happened that changed the course of my life forever. I received a scholarship to take classes with the local community college. This enabled me to move into the special housing unit for college students. The ladies who lived in this wing all had one thing in common: the desire to better themselves through education. The

atmosphere of this wing was like nothing I had seen in prison. They were calm and always studying together. They had full-time jobs, in addition to being full-time students. They quickly took me under their wings. These ladies had a different mindset, and it changed not only how I was doing my time but how I was living my life. They weren't concerned with girlfriends or playing cards all day. Instead, they were filling their minds with knowledge and changing the destination of their futures. In a place where inconsistency and chaos ruled, they had created a safe haven where one could actually envision and foster growth.

I entered that wing when I was twenty years old. Now, at age thirty, I am a productive person with a college degree who looks to help forge a community no matter where I go. I have since lived in the honor dorm and the Prison Fellowship Academy unit as well. Each time I change my location, I am reminded of moving into the college wing and how my mindset can impact those around me. I try hard to instill the importance of community into those I live with by being the one to reach out and show another how things can be done. I have learned that each one of our lives is a book being read by another person and it is up to us what we choose to have inscribed on the pages.

Ashleigh Dye

Ashleigh Dye is our Third Place Winner

WITS tries to communicate issues in a way that lends itself to producing positive change and revealing the limitless potential behind bars.

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Unfortunately, we do not pay for general submissions, although we have frequent contests and also currently pay \$25 for First Page newsletter essays.

We consider a submission permission to edit and post. Length is flexible, although 1,500 words or less is a typical post. Poetry is considered.

We also accept donations of art for the Gallery.

FACING DIFFERENCES: Replacing the Static in America's Prisons With the Effectiveness of Human Dynamic

By Terry Robinson

The prison environment is a breeding pen for disruptive behavior and hostility, an environment in direct contention with rehabilitation. It is a conscientious battle ground where the tool of dehumanization is essential to pitting prisoners against themselves, and as well as officers. The current best laid correctional plan is when C/O's come with the willingness to dehumanize prisoners, having undergone priming procedures to view themselves as extensions of the Court, employed to administer punishment for crimes. Their capability to dehumanize creates a chasm between C/O's and inmates where decency and respect lies at the bottom. Friction occurs when officers are either encouraged or overlooked when they strip prisoners of their human rights and threaten them with infractions, segregation, even physical harm. This is what's considered 'static' security, a term coined by Ian Dunbar to describe a method of ensuring safety within prisons.

But static security is the very thing that fuels prison hostility while in turn ruining the integrity of the Criminal Justice system. Static security is just that - a method of providing security in prisons that is more likely to generate institutional static. It is why inmates and officers will always see one another as the opposition, when at the core of their differences is a lack of respect. C/O's are expected to enforce with an iron fist the daily restrictions imposed on hardened criminals, while the prisoners' responses are oftentimes grudging and retaliatory. This unsympathetic approach is what makes correctional institutions an extremely difficult place to grow and the inability to grow in prisons in turn contributes to recidivism.

Static security is the permission by white collar prison officials to compromise and even dismiss the humanity of prisoners. The show of force creates rifts between officers and inmates that will continue to be an impediment of growth. However, the role of prison guards should serve as more than proxy for justice, they should be made to facilitate positive transformation; and instead of causing static in the rehabilitative process, they should be working to establish a human dynamic.

Dynamic security is the systemic practice of officers managing prisoners while exhibiting empathy. It focuses on human connections and positive rapport that thrives on the premise of respect. Dynamic security encourages prison guards to implement compassion while tasked with overseeing prisoners, building a mutual, nonjudgmental respect for one another that supports cordial interactions and represses the sense for conflict.

Norway, among other places, has operated successfully on this system of dynamic security for years with extensive studies conducted on its mechanics to show what works and what doesn't. There, the officers take part in specialized training to understand prisons as a place to maintain safety and security as well as a space in which rehabilitation takes place. The response does not always have a positive effect, as prisoners are more likely to rebel against authoritative figures, while prison guards who extend decency to inmates are subject to be admonished by their peers as it goes against their proxy for justice mentality. Yet there are many cases like Norway, where C/O's and prisoners share impersonal talks, cordial gestures, and have mutual respect for one another; such cases are the model for pseudo dynamic security happening in our own nation's prisons... and they work.

Here on NC Death Row, there is a mutual respect between C/O's and death row inmates, one that is fostered by the strict housing circumstances that allows both parties to occupy the same space and proximity to one another for decades. The result of such rapport is a passive Death Row atmosphere where violence seldom occurs, and the infraction rate is exceptionally low. When one's greatest adversity is battling the courts for a stay of execution, it can feel tedious to pick fights with officers.

In response, the C/O's operate with respect to our circumstances while equally upholding the duties to which they are assigned. The dynamic between the officers and inmates here is proof that empathy effects a healthy work system where opposing sides connect through human relations, and although the C/O's don't participate in the rehabilitative process as prohibited by the administration, still, its effects prove positive when recognizing the humanity of a person first and their position as officer or inmate second.

Correctional officers are not the bane of prisoners - no, that would be separatists' policies, institutional benefits, and an unethical systemic agenda. The animosity against prison guards are mere distractions to prevent positive growth and change. It's the C/O's that interact with the inmates every day that have the greatest capacity to facilitate rehabilitation.

It is far time we challenge the effectiveness of our nation's penal institutions by demanding higher rehabilitative standards. Prisons have an obligation to society to make an effort to correct behaviors, not fuel the potential for harm by inciting static. Prison guards have jobs to do and prisoners have their roles as well, but even opposing sides shouldn't exclude us from empathizing with one another and working together through shared humanity.

REFERENCE: Kilmer, A., Abdel-Salam, S., & Silver, I. A. (2023). "The Uniform's in the Way": Navigating the Tension Between Security and Therapeutic Roles in a Rehabilitation-Focused Prison in Norway. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 50(4), 521-540. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/10.1177/00938548221143536>