

# Walk In Those Shoes

March 2024 Newsletter – ISSUE 8



## The Dark Place Left Behind

By Benito Rios

*I came to prison on my own; and therefore, I'll do my time on my own.* It's drilled into you by staff and residents alike, "Keep moving, don't worry about him!" "Stay facing forward, worry about yourself, stay in your lane!" I'm ashamed to admit I believed it, even lived by it. For thirteen years that was my way of thinking, until the day myself and eleven other men were called on to help start a pilot program within TDCJ – Companion Sitters.

The prison atmosphere can have a crippling effect on a person's mind. Moreover, when other pressing issues like a death in the family, a 'Dear John' letter, a parole denial, or any number of other things is added to the equation, some are capable of coping with the mental anguish. However, there are others who struggle. When those who struggle attempt to hurt themselves, they are put in a cell with an officer posted in front of the cell to provide constant observation.

There they stay, tormented by their ordeal and the voices in their heads until an opening is found for them at a mental health unit. It can take as long as a month and a half sometimes. That is where the pilot program comes in. As a Companion Sitter, our task is to observe listen and document. We don't take the place of an officer, for they are always present watching over the Companion Sitters in case an officer is needed. We also don't take the place of a mental health professional.

We sit with the person who is going through the crisis in place of an officer, we watch to make sure the person inside doesn't attempt to harm themselves, and we listen to them and document every fifteen minutes. The difference between us and an officer or a mental health professional is that we engage with them one-on-one for six hours before we rotate out.

The residents being watched are on a 24-hour observation, so when we return, we may sit with another person or we may be with the same person. When we communicate with them, they know we can relate to them and share their experience of being locked up. It's more personal. For some, we might read the bible, for others just make them aware they are not alone in their situation.

### March Writing Prompt

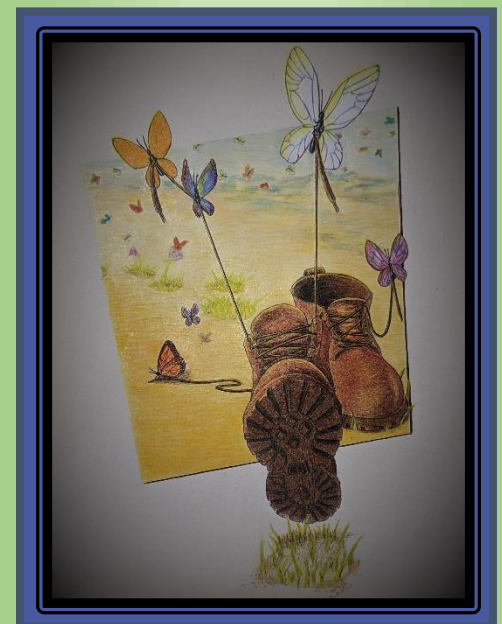
**Describe a time you had to overcome adversity or a challenge.**

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

**Walk In Those Shoes  
P.O. Box 70092  
Henrico, VA 23255**

Writers whose essays are chosen for Page 1 of the monthly newsletter will receive \$25 upon publication.

If you would like to support WITS, 501c(3) please donate at  
[www.walkinthoseshoes.com](http://www.walkinthoseshoes.com)  
or P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, Virginia 23255



Artist, Cerron T. Hooks

We'll sometimes relate to them with personal experiences, letting them know we were once in that dark place and sharing how we moved out of the darkness and back into the sunlight.

We've been doing this for almost two months and there have been more than fifty residents, new friends, who have been on the other side of the door. I say friends because that is what most have become in the end. We get to know each other, and the best part of all is that most of them come to discover they no longer need to be transferred anywhere else, though some move forward with requiring additional help. But during their wait, they have someone that cares about them at all times. They are not alone in their situation; they have a Companion Sitter with them.

We come to prison alone, but we enter into a community of people who are doing time with us; thus, they also have or will have issues just like us. Furthermore, when we go home, we don't do so alone. There will be many more out there like us. We will have talked and bonded and gotten out of the dark place and moved into the sunlight together.

I am a Companion Sitter, and along with the rest of the Companion Sitters, we help save lives one cell at a time. Once the program is fully approved, we will be travelling to other units in the State of Texas to start other chapters of Companion Sitters. Keep us in your prayers.

**Benito Rios, author of *The Dark Place Left Behind*:**

*I am now a certified Life Coach. My goal is to help people reach their full potential, whether it's helping them tap into their skills, working with them to find their purpose, or motivating them to reach their goals. I support them in making their lives better. The Director of Rehabilitation along with the administration at Jester 3 are all for this change in the prison culture. It's beautiful.*



# Looking For WRITER CONTRIBUTIONS

INTERESTED IN CONTRIBUTING TO A WITS CREATED 'BEGINNING WRITER' CURRICULUM?  
WE ARE LOOKING FOR INPUT TO BE INCLUDED IN A WRITING GUIDE & WORKBOOK  
CREATED BY RESIDENTS FOR RESIDENTS.

SEND YOUR IDEAS TO WITS, MARKED '**BOOK PROJECT**'. WE ARE LOOKING FOR:

- Short essays sharing how writing, regardless of type, has impacted you.
- Writing tips you have learned along the way.
- Letter writing inspiration, from personal to writing a legislator.
- All genres of writing guidance.
- Proposed workbook chapters.

All submissions must be original and not previously published.

Submission is permission to edit & publish.

If your work is chosen for inclusion, you will be contacted.

Please send proposed material to WITS, BOOK PROJECT, P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, Virginia 23255



Leo Hylton, MS

## Leo Hylton – Changing the Narrative & Redefining a Community

Leo Hylton, a resident of Maine State Prison, is one of a growing number of individuals turning the narrative of what incarceration looks like upside down, his rehabilitation, growth and leadership by example challenging traditional mindsets that support mass incarceration.

Leo has been pursuing his education for years, earning his master's degree in Conflict Analysis and Resolution in 2022, and currently a PhD student. His studies and work are focused on social justice advocacy and activism, grounded in trauma-informed and healing-centered Restorative Justice Practice.

Mr. Hylton is an experienced presenter, having spoken at several events including the National Conference on Higher Education in Prisons and at

several Carter School Mini-Conferences on the subjects of carcerality, restorative and transformative justice, and abolition. He is also a researcher, a collaborator and a facilitator.

Additionally, Leo Hylton is a published author, having worked as a columnist for The Bollard, as well as written *A Restorative Pathway to Decarceration and Abolition*, a research article, and also the peer-reviewed article, *Trauma, Spirituality and Healing: A Journey Through the Lens of an Incarcerated Person*.

While all of those accomplishments speak to Leo's commitment to redefining society's perception of the possibilities within the carceral environment and also the residents who live there, he has also bridged the gap between the incarcerated community and the academic community, not only through speaking engagements, but also as a Facilitation Course Assistant and a Visiting Instructor at Colby College. And, if all that were not enough, Leo also volunteers his time as a board member, consultant, and facilitator, among other things.

If you would like to contact Leo Hylton to discuss a future project and what insight he could bring to your event or class, he can be contacted at: [leohylton279@gmail.com](mailto:leohylton279@gmail.com).

## IT IS THAT TIME AGAIN – SPRING WRITING CONTEST

There is a depth of resilience and strength that exists within this community. Ingenuity, creativity, insight, individuals adapting and even supporting one another to adjust to incarceration and everything that means. **PROMPT: Describe an act you have witnessed that reflected inner strength.** That might be in the form of self-control, forgiveness, or community building. It could look like someone spending decades pursuing education and becoming a PhD student and professor while living in prison, like Leo Hylton, above. Or Benito Rios who is now a Companion Sitter in Texas, supporting those who are in crisis. Or it could be someone who shared their extra commissary with his or her neighbor.

**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 & 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: \$75 | Second Place: \$50 | Third Place: \$25

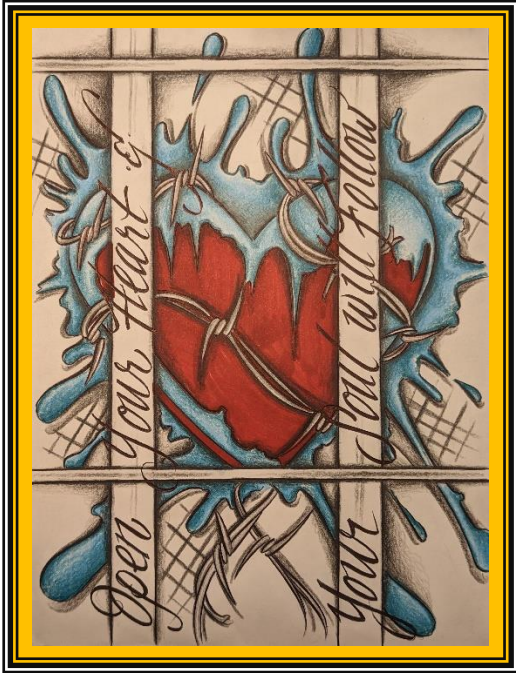
**DEADLINE:** June 30, 2024. Decisions will be posted by approximately July 31, 2024.

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





# The Gallery



'Open Your Heart' – Keith Erickson

## 'OPEN YOUR HEART'

by Keith Erickson

Years ago, while sitting in the SHU (Security Housing Unit) and away from general population inmates due to then being a prison gang member, I became so detached from the outside world that I tattooed the words "soul less" across the tops of my feet. I had gone so long locked in the SHU (13 years) that I began to convince myself I never wanted to feel anything again, that I wanted to feel 'numb'. Years after my release from the SHU and denouncing gang membership, without using violence as a means of keeping others away from me, I began to open my heart up as I allowed myself to feel again. Whether it was in a self-help group with tears streaming down my face as I addressed the many traumatic experiences of my life, or I took the time to get to know another person in here that was also working towards redemption, I started to look at the tattooed words across my feet as distant reminders of the fact that *anyone* can change and start feeling alive again.

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.

## Creative Opportunity

**Certain Days has put out an open call for abolition-related art & article submissions for their Freedom for Political Prisoners Calendar, to be released this fall. They are especially interested in submissions from prison.**

**Deadline:** Friday, May 31, 2024

**Articles:** Due to space limitations, submissions may be lightly edited for clarity & concision, with no change to original intent.

- 400-500 words maximum, longer pieces will be edited for length.
- Poetry is welcome but needs to be significantly shorter than 400 words to accommodate layout.
- Please include a suggested title.

**Art:** The calendar is 11" tall x 8.5" wide, so 'portrait' orientation is preferred. Art need not fit those dimensions exactly.

- Interested in a diversity of media.
- The calendar is printed in color & color images are preferred.

### SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

1. Send your submissions and brief bio by May 31 to [info@certaindays.org](mailto:info@certaindays.org).
2. ARTISTS: You can send a low-res file as a submission, but if your piece is chosen, we will need a high-res version (600 dpi).
3. You may send as many submissions as you like. Chosen artists & authors will receive a copy of the calendar & promotional postcards. Because the calendar is a fundraiser, money cannot be offered to contributors.

Prisoner submissions due June 14 addressed to: Certain Days, c/o Burning Books, 420 Connecticut St., Buffalo, NY 14213

Certain Days works from an anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, feminist, queer- and trans-liberationist position. All proceeds from the calendar go to abolitionist organizations working for a better world. There is no affiliation between Certain Days and WITS.

# CONFLICTING BOUNDARIES: The Menacing Dynamic of Prisons

By Terry Robinson

In moments of duress, *"We don't rise to the level of our expectations; we fall to the level of our training."* - Archilochus, Greek poet

Here on NC Death Row, I participate in a weekly 'virtual chat room' with two other individuals as we host a table talk session. Our goal is to lend insight to one another through open dialogue about weekly topics, while also bridging social gaps. This week, I posed the topic to the panel in the form of a question - How should we deal with conflict? The feedback was invaluable. One member prefers to process his feelings before giving in to confrontation, and the other employs empathy as taught to him by his life coach. I divulged to them my quarrelsome past and unnecessary fist fights. In large part, in the past I dreaded being viewed as a coward, so I settled confrontation with violence instead. Given my views on conflict today, I now realize I didn't have to fight at all.

But by the end of our session, I was still no closer to procuring a clear resolution. Prison culture plays by a menacing set of rules where conflict is seldom avoided, but the camaraderie of NC Death Row, living alongside men for decades on end, greatly diminishes the tendency for conflict. Here, we often rely on diplomacy to settle differences, admonishing one another even when petty disputes result in a fight. The understanding we have developed makes it convenient for me to presume I've got a good bearing on conflict resolution - to the point that maybe I'm a bit naive. I am privileged not to be confronted with conflict in my current surroundings, but... what happens if and when I am?

The truth is, I was never taught to resolve conflict amicably, my impulse was to fight. However, I'm 50 now with two grown sons for whom I choose not to pass along aggression; my obligation to keep them safe. I don't want my boys resorting to violence to feel secure in their manhood, knowing hurting others is much more invalidating. In my 24 years on Death Row, I've reflected much on the years before and after I came to prison and have taken accountability for my wrongs. My hope is to transform into a better man. I recognize that my past aggressions served nothing but ill-purpose, and I am all for avoiding future conflict, but in a place dominated by machismo, I worry the choice may not always be mine to make.

Prison, by design, is a place that fosters conflict, mass living conditions violate personal boundaries, and the belief that hardened criminals deserve to do hard time is what warrants prisoners to display acts of aggression. But no one enters prison aspiring to be worse. The conflict that results helps create a false narrative that serves to hinder growth and reform. Exacerbating conflict is one way hurt people impede the healing of others to accommodate their unwillingness to heal themselves. There are, however, preventative tools we can use to pacify intense situations. Diplomacy. De-escalation. Disengaging. And yes, a bit of empathy can work wonders to defuse conflict. These tools won't dismiss hostility all together, as the power dynamic of prison will forever be conflict and boundaries, one being a precursor to the other, but conflict resolution should be the driving force behind more productive prison experiences, experiences that won't result in a return to being behind bars.

I believe in the principle that at our core every human being is born good. It's when we grow to emulate the practices of others that we exhibit qualities deemed good or bad. With that, I was encouraged by one member of our panel to see beyond the conflict to the goodness that lies beneath. By recognizing that a person's need for conflict comes from a hurt place within, I might more easily empathize. It was sound advice, some I hope to pass on - resolving conflict is well within our control. The urge to respond irrationally is an impulse triggered by the feeling of helplessness, at least that's the case for me. Because of our meaningful table talk sessions, I'm growing ever more confident in my rehabilitative process. Resolving conflict efficiently does not make me a pushover, nor does it mean I won't have to fight - it just means the decision is mine.

MORE WRITING BY TERRY ROBINSON, AKA CHANTON, CAN BE FOUND AT: <https://walkinthoseshoes.com/author/chanton/>