

Walk In Those Shoes

April 2024 Newsletter – ISSUE 9

Doin' the Write Thing

By Jason Hurst

Monday through Friday, from roughly 8:00 to 10:00 AM, my classmates and I attend a unique writing class. We don't gather under the vaulted ceilings, cornices, and Gothic architecture of Duke University, nor on the grassy campus of UNC-Chapel Hill. Our class is held under a guard's watchful eye and a high ceiling topped with water-stained tiles. Surveillance cameras occupy the space of cornices. No bell indicates the change of classes, though the occasional interruption of a doctor's appointment or attorney visit is shouted through an intercom. We huddle around an octagonal stainless-steel table, derrières resting on four equally stainless, equally hard, welded-on metal stools. There are four of us including our teacher Chanton, or sensei as I like to call him; in this class, I'm truly the grasshopper. We have different backgrounds and believe in different things. I'm Muslim, and the others identify as Christian, eclectic and Pantheist. We have in common the desire for change, ourselves as well as our circumstances.

Our process varies, sometimes the sensei totes several writing books to the octagon where we study the advice of various authors and wrestle with writing exercises. Then there are book-free days which find our heads bent, steadily scribbling away at personal essays, stopping now and then to check a word or test a sentence on one another. Two of us keep Chopin or Mozart playing softly in our earbuds, muffling the chaos of fellow prisoners going about their day. Another writer, Bdot, dreads bunched on his head, steadily writes, sometimes laboring over multiple stories within our two hours, concentration displayed through his scrunched brows. We scratch through several sheets of paper trying to make it feel right, to show, not tell.

"The first draft of anything is shit," Hemingway said. So we write, a scribble here and a marked through word there, until we begin a second and third draft, until what we've experienced begins to come alive on paper just as we saw it. In the last fifteen minutes we read aloud and



April Writing Prompt

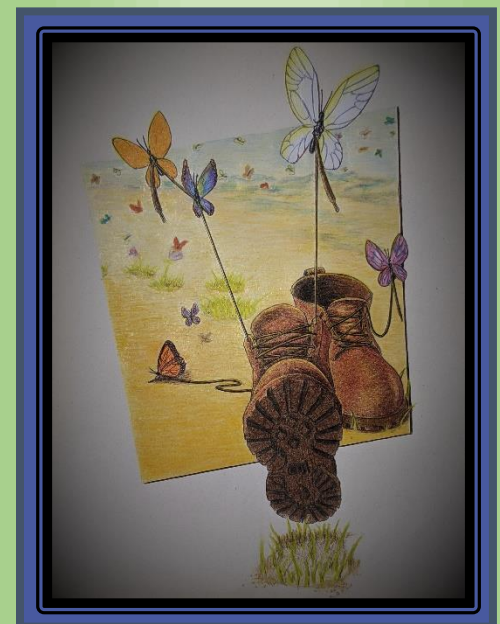
Describe an experience that taught you the importance of perseverance.

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:

**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 or P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, Virginia 23255



Artist, Cerron T. Hooks

discuss what we've written. Sometimes, based on the suggestion of a classmate, we reshape the clay. Other times we change nothing. After class, we carefully tuck our writings into folders or stash them between a book's pages, hoping to protect them from the destruction of a surprise shakedown by negligent guards.

In the morning, we collect our unfinished work and favorite pens and meet in the cellblock dayroom where, with a sprinkle of classical music and determination, we'll work to log our life stories. We're not writing for semester credits nor pats on the back, give us your honest critiques instead. We're not under the illusion that our writings are Pulitzer-Prize-worthy, there are far more important things at stake. We of North Carolina's death row writing group write for our lives.

Arizona Book Club



Reflections on *The Boys From Biloxi*, by John Grisham

"The book kept me guessing from the beginning to the end, couldn't put it down. On point, from the gangsters playing the game to the DA. Intriguing cat and mouse game."

– Michael Kroetz

"It surprised me at the very end. I liked this book, but normally I'm not a Grisham fan. I do not like courtroom dramas. I would have loved to have lived in this time period."

– Austin Dowling

"John Grisham is a favorite author of mine. I like his writing style."

– Victor McKaney

"Would have liked to have seen a different ending, but it was good. I liked Jesse, he was for the right way of doing things when you're in those types of positions."

– Rodgerick Shears

"Kept you guessing until the very end, but left all the power in one man's hands. The closer you got to the end, it slowed down considerably."

- Brandon Clarke

Overall, the club gave
The Boys From Biloxi 4.25 stars

"I think the end was a little weak and rushed. The imagery was splendid. I would read another book by this author, but hopefully his other books don't leave me with questions. All in all, easy read."

– Donald Hobley





According to the Prison Policy Initiative, there are currently over 1.9 million people confined at some level in the United States.

These numbers do not take into account the prison-impacted family members left behind, those ultimately left with the financial burden of maintaining communication.

A Handful of States Have Transitioned to No-Cost Prison Phone Calls - Points to Ponder

- The incarcerated are frequently relocated & geographically distanced from their familial and societal support network, including children, limiting or making visitation impossible.
- What communication and visitation expenses exist are primarily borne by family and friends, not by the incarcerated person themselves, creating a financial burden on an already economically vulnerable population.
- Since 2021, five states have transitioned to no-cost phone calls from prisons, anticipating strong social contacts could lead to a reduction in recidivism at a time when prisons are overcrowded and understaffed as a result of mass incarceration.
- The Bureau of Justice Statistics released a report in 2021 indicating that within ten years of release from prison, 62% of individuals had returned to prison (Clarke, M., 2022).
- In one study of 255 high-risk female offenders, 44% returned to prison within five years. Those that did not return reported a higher level of familial support during their incarceration (Barrick K., Lattimore P.K., & Visher C.A., 2014).
- A study of 16,420 inmates indicated social support in the form of visitation had a significant impact on reducing recidivism, the overall study concluding that the community benefits of supporting inmate social connections would likely outweigh the monetary cost of supporting those connections (Duwe G., & Clark V., 2013).
- In A Virginia Department of Corrections report (2022) some stake-holders suggested that free prison phone calls, considering the available research on the benefit of social support, could be viewed as a 'rehabilitative program' available to the entire incarcerated population, making it quite cost effective.
- Half of the incarcerated population are parents to minor children, and two thirds of those parents do not receive visits from their children for various reasons, including distance from home and inability to fund visitation (Wang, L. 2022). Prisons could ease the financial burden of communication and support parent/child bonds by providing free phone calls (Wang, L. 2022).

Lived Experience From California, A State With No-Cost Phone Calls

"I don't sit on the phone all day and just continue to talk and talk and talk."

"If I had kids out there that were in infant stages and they needed to be provided for by my significant other, like my wife, that would be a burden that would be taken off her."

"...and I have the opportunity to still play a role in my children's lives, where I can call every day, where I can talk to my little ones, where I can ask them how they are doing in school."

"You have the capability to maintain or establish or repair strained relationships."

"It does play a key role in your rehabilitation."

"It feels good to be able to come back to my room after a self-help group and share with my wife or my brother something that I've learned and actually get that motivation and feedback from them, that encouragement."

"We are still held accountable for our conduct in here by what they call loss of privileges." "We get the privilege of utilizing the phone based on our conduct."

K. Erickson, personal communication, April 7, 2024.

Barrick K., Lattimore P.K., & Visher C.A. (2014). Reentering women: The impact of social ties on long-term recidivism. *The Prison Journal*. doi:10.1177/0032885514537596

Clarke, M. (2022). Justice department releases ten-year recidivism study. *Prison Legal News*. <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2022/mar/1/justice-department-releases-ten-year-recidivism-study/>

Duwe G., & Clark V. (2013). Blessed be the social tie that binds: The effects of prison visitation on offender recidivism. *Criminal justice policy review*. doi:10.1177/0887403411429724

Sawyer, W. & Wagner, P. (2024). Mass incarceration: The whole pie 2024. *Prison Policy Initiative*. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2024.html>

Virginia Department of Corrections. (2022). Reduction or elimination of costs and fees charged to inmates in state correctional facilities. <https://rqa.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2022/RD500/PDF>

Wang, L. (2022). Both sides of the bars: How mass incarceration punishes families. *Prison Policy Initiative*. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/08/11/parental_incarceration/

Writing Contest – Deadline June 30, 2024

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.

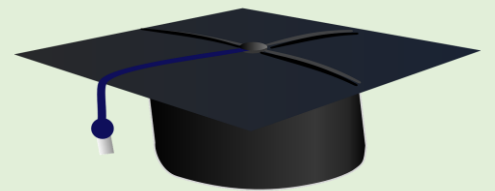
PROMPT: Describe an act you have witnessed that reflected inner strength. That might be in the form of self-control, forgiveness, or community building. It could look like someone spending decades pursuing education and becoming a PhD student and professor while living in prison, like Leo Hylton in Maine. Or it could look like 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



Congratulations to the first ever graduating class of the Cognitive Life Skills Course on Texas' Jester 3 Unit.

Pictured from left to right along the back: Frank Turcio, Shane Drousche (Life Coach), Donny Sanders, & John Salinas; and left to right in front: Alton Wright, Joseph Carter, Dominique Eilers and Percy Arceneaux. The program is an intensive class, delivered by the Life Coaches and runs six weeks long. Focus includes awareness of behavior, thinking and reflection, identifying feelings, corrective tools for problem behavior, addictions, and change.

The class, the Life Coaches and the graduates are changing their community. Congratulations to these and each and every future graduate!

The Gallery



'INTERNAL FREEDOM'

by Keith Erickson

I spent much of my life searching for freedom in more than just the physical sense of the word. I suffered a great deal of childhood trauma, and my only escape was running from the world around me, despite how much it tried to embrace me. At some point I stopped running and began to face my fear of ever being hurt again and left to fend for myself; that's when the shackles that held me a prisoner within began to simply fall away.

Finding freedom within myself did not happen overnight, it was a process of awakening that took years to sort

through. It is hard for any human being to develop trust in others, trust in themselves, when they have been hurt by the very ones that brought them into the world with the responsibility of ensuring their safety. I fell victim to a cycle of generational abuse, and in turn, my self-worth had been less than nothing early on. The world is full of people like me, and we should make it a point to show them in every way imaginable that freedom does not have to be impossible. We should, in every effort, be the light that they have been searching for. It has taken me a lifetime to get here, but I'm here. I found my way. I want the same for those around me.

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.

LAST CALL – DEADLINE MAY 31, 2024

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. or jail.

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.
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.

COMMON COURTESY: Representation Over Presentation

By Terry Robinson

There are two things every community must have in order to be efficient - flexibility and respect. Flexibility is necessary when embracing each other's differences, and respect is the courtesy we extend. Another key factor in maintaining a sound community is the scope of our perspective. The unwillingness to learn about those with whom we proximate space affects the wholeness of any community. NC Death Row is one such place where disconnect impairs community wholeness. True, we are a community through shared affliction, but our psychological woes are individualized; for that reason, we have lived decades in prison together, yet know very little about one another. We know only how a person chooses to present, but not always what they represent, which is the natural order in prison culture where presentation equals safety and survival. A sound, efficient community strives to understand the representation of the people, the struggles through which they've walked and the principles on which they stand. Being informed about one another is the most meaningful step towards the development of mutual respect, while flexibility allows for consideration of others and willingness to learn about them.

One community rarely represented in prison literature is the LGBTQ community. The stigma attached to sexuality in prisons is a demoralizing one, making the subject taboo. But not talking about it doesn't change the fact that diverse sexuality is a part of every community throughout the world, differences that are often targeted by the ignorance of many. That was me... ignorant to the issues of fellow prisoners because their preferences were unacceptable in my mind. I was unwilling to educate myself on how to respect those whose sexuality conflicted with mine. I didn't realize it yet, but because of my indifference, I was the breach in community wholeness, not just 'being myself'. My error was that I lacked the information to respect members of the LGBTQ community until my friend Jazz came along and gave me some much-needed insight. Jazz is transgender. Before her transition she was known as Woodstock, someone who commandeered the respect of everyone here. Woodstock had been on NC Death Row for over 35 years and had even survived an execution date. He was humble in his comings, soft spoken, kind, considerate, and one of the smartest people I knew here.

Woodstock became a writer over the years, and in doing so he rediscovered some trauma and truths buried in his past. He emerged from the pages as Jasmine and has been living openly as transgender ever since. In August 2019, the NC Board of Evaluation and Management of Transgender Offenders created TARC (Transgender Accommodation Review Committees). The new policy stated that offenders could request hormone therapy, undergarments, private showering, special housing, hygiene/hair products, and name and gender marker change. Jazz appealed to the committee and was approved; her transition has since been in effect. Jazz now identifies as she/her and wears lip balm, head wraps and eye liner. Many men here are uncomfortable with the transition and scoffed at the idea of respect. My stance on the matter was that I highly admired Woodstock, so the admiration easily transferred to Jazz; but I still didn't know how to separate the two, as I was blindly respecting Woodstock, while perpetually disrespecting Jasmine.

Diverse sexuality is frequently mentioned in prisons but hardly ever discussed at length. When it is, vicious ridicule and obscenities are wildly flung. Therefore, the extent of my limited knowledge of the LGBTQ community comes from the media, through TV and editorials. I'd read cases where individuals declared themselves nonbinary and detached from gender roles. People whose views differed from mine were taking great stands in the world to be no longer categorized but recognized. And still I was clueless when I read about an individual character in Tracy Deonn's book, *Legendborn*, who she repeatedly referred to as 'they/them'... Omar Epps did likewise in his book, *Nubia: The Reckoning*, where a single character was unmarked by gender pronouns. Nothing in the pages suggested these character's sexual preference, which was when I realized that the disbanding from gender roles was not an LGBTQ community choice to break from the norm, but a humanitarian choice to reinvent it.

It would be another book given to me by Jazz that gave me true insight into the subject of non-binary, *Nobody Has To Know* by Pidgeon Pagonis. Pagonis was born with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS) which is when "...the XY chromosome responsible for the male sex characteristics convert testosterone into estrogen instead."* Due to this condition, Pagonis presented as a girl but technically their gender assignment was neutral. I contemplated what pronouns would be appropriate for Pagonis; surely, I don't get to call them what I choose? Such a ludicrous idea helped me to understand that people deserve a say in how they're addressed, and Jazz had stated that she was no longer Woodstock - and so I had to let him go.

I won't say the sensitivity of prison culture should change to accommodate people's differences, but to get courtesy in a community, one must be willing to give it or it's not much of a community at all. I am working towards addressing Jazz appropriately, but often enough I slip up; not because I'm ignorant to the rights she deserves but the recurrence of presentation. For the 25 years that I've been here on NC Death Row, Jazz presented as Woodstock, someone who I greatly looked up to. But there never was a Woodstock, it was Jazz who I looked up to all along and everything she represents and to that I say... much respect.

*Pagonis, P. (2023). *Nobody Needs to Know: A Memoir*. Topple.

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