

# Walk In Those Shoes

May 2024 Newsletter – ISSUE 10



## Ramona

By Eric Strenge

Prison is often portrayed in the movies as a dark, dangerous and scary place, where ‘bad’ people are locked away in order to keep the public safe. If this were all anyone ever knew, it would be safe to assume that no good could be found in such a place. Having spent many years in prison, I have seen a lot of the negativity, but what may surprise some, is that I have also had some of the most positive experiences of my life in prison.

One of the experiences that stands out the most is being able to participate in the Leader Dogs For The Blind program. In this program, incarcerated individuals, ‘handlers’, are assigned an 8-week old puppy whom they are responsible for training until the dog is one-year-old. This training is intense, with a long list of do’s and don’ts and includes weekly training sessions with a Leader Dogs Organization volunteer who comes into the prison. The dogs live in the cell and are with their handlers 24/7. Over the course of a year, intense bonds are formed. The year-long training is meant to prepare the dog to one day be assigned as a seeing eye dog. For many of us, this is an incredible experience. Walking a dog on a leash, teaching them tricks, even just getting to pet a dog while in prison is a chance to feel ‘human’ again. The dogs uplift everyone in the facility. Training and being responsible for the puppies gives each handler a sense of purpose and brings new meaning to their life.

I was lucky enough to be moved into a cell with a handler and his dog, Ramona, who I had an instant bond with. My cellie only had Ramona for a couple weeks before finding out he was about to go home on parole. He suggested that I become Ramona’s handler so she could remain in the same cell and with someone she was already familiar with. I jumped at the opportunity.

It’s easy to forget that the real purpose of the program is to help the blind recipient who eventually receives the dog you’ve raised and also

### May Writing Prompt

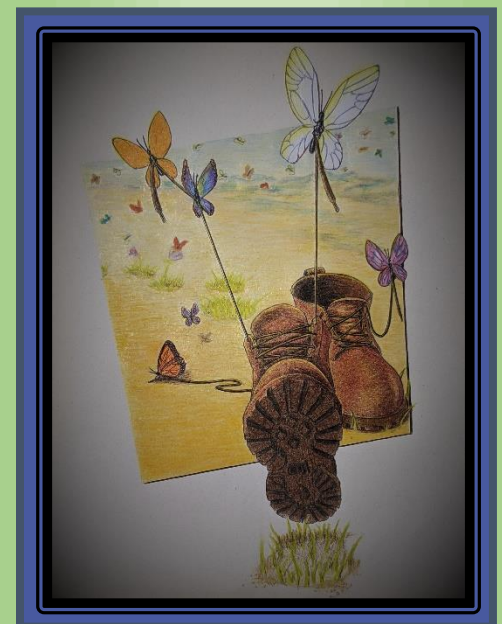
**Describe a time when you had to deal with a difficult person.**

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

hard to tell who benefits more, the incarcerated person, the puppy who grows up only knowing love and attention, or the recipient who will gain newfound freedom in the world through the eyes of their dog. I was so proud to be in the program that I often shared photos and updates with my family about Ramona. It was during this period that I felt less like a 'prisoner'. Cleaning up the puppy's messes was never something to complain about. It was simply something that every dog owner goes through, whether in prison or out. Everything we did was for a greater purpose, and I got to proudly watch as Ramona grew and learned, passing all her tests each week.

After a year with me, she returned to Leader Dog's headquarters for final training and testing, and I waited patiently for updates on her progress. When a monthly progress report and new photo arrived, I was so happy to hear Ramona was one of the best dogs and became certified as a seeing eye dog. She was described exactly as I knew her – smart, loveable, eager to learn and a dutiful companion.

Crying in prison is something we are told to never do. I have shed some tears but only once, on a very happy occasion. It was after I received a letter from a woman named Marta who received my Ramona. She thanked me for having raised such a sweet and loving dog. Marta explained that she had a retinal disease and was gradually losing her eye sight. This was her first guide dog, and thanks to Ramona, she could give up her cane. "She will be my eyes, and she will help me to feel more confident and independent." Receiving Ramona was a dream come true. Marta said she would have loved to give me a big hug so I'd know just how grateful she would always be. Even though we've never met and had that hug, I felt the love. Knowing I made such a difference in someone's life is one of the proudest moments in mine.

**FOR MORE WRITING FROM PRISONS, RESOURCES & ARCHIVED NEWSLETTERS VISIT <https://walkinthoseshoes.com/>**

**WITS published its first Newsletter in 2023, eight years after it first began sharing writing and news from inside prisons, and four years after being established as a 501c3 in 2019.**

**We recognize the need to not only keep costs minimal, but also compensate contributors, when possible, through writing contests as well as front page essay fees. Because of that, WITS Newsletters are offered for free download at: <https://walkinthoseshoes.com/newsletter/>**

**We encourage supporters to print and distribute copies, at no cost.**

Should you like to receive the newsletter directly from WITS, please send a check or money order in the amount of \$2.00 per desired issues to cover printing and mailing costs, made out to **Walk In Those Shoes**, at **P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, VA 23255**. Be sure to include mailing instructions and complete address for your facility.



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**LEADER DOGS FOR THE BLIND, founded in 1939, is an organization that works to pair the visually impaired with guide dogs.**

**They do this at NO COST to the recipients, allowing anyone vision impaired, regardless of their ability to pay, to have access to a guide dog.**

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Eric Streng, on Page 1, shared his experience with Leader Dogs For The Blind and the Prison Puppies program that is currently operated within twelve state facilities. Initiatives like these have far reaching benefits for all parties involved, from those who donate, to the volunteer dog trainers within prison, to the eventual recipient of the guide dog, as well as secondary beneficiaries, such as staff and fellow residents within the prison. Hundreds of dogs have been successfully trained through the Prison Puppies program and are now living as guide dogs, offering new freedom to the visually impaired at no cost to them.

**To learn more or support Leader Dogs For The Blind through a donation, you can go to: <https://www.leaderdog.org/volunteer/raise-a-puppy/prison-puppies/>**

## Last Call - 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.

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**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



'Work Title' – Your Name

## 'WORK TITLE'

by Your Name

WITS wants *your art*. As an organization formed to support creative writing, we also acknowledge that not all creativity is or can be expressed by the written word. If you express your creativity through art, we would love to share that in *The Gallery*.

Please include a paragraph or two sharing something about the piece, possibly what inspired it or what it means to you.

Originals cannot be returned, for that reason, please consider mailing photos of your work. Art and the accompanying narrative can be mailed to the address below or emailed to:

[contact@walkinthoseshoes.com](mailto:contact@walkinthoseshoes.com)

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.

## Prisoner Visitation & Support (PVS) Serving Individuals Within Federal & Military Prisons

PVS has a long history of providing much-needed social support through visitation to individuals within Federal and Military Prisons.

This social support, beneficial to the recipient, the visitor & the institution, is offered free of charge, as PVS pairs individuals who might not otherwise receive visitation with volunteers. When pairing individuals, priority is given to those who:

**Do not ordinarily receive visits,  
Want or need visits,  
Are in solitary confinement,  
Are on death row,  
Are serving long sentences.**

To donate, volunteer, or request to be paired with a visitor, you can contact PVS at:  
**PO Box 58068, 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102 | 215.241.7117 | [PVS@prisonervisitation.org](mailto:PVS@prisonervisitation.org)**



There is no affiliation between PVS and WITS. PVS serves federal and military residents only.



# THE BUBBLE: Exploring Lifelines on Death Row

By Terry Robinson

Though violence is always wrong, the make-believe thrill of slaying villains can imbue a sense of justice enough to confront the villain within ourselves. I discovered this and more during my first role playing game (RPG) on NC Death Row, where I encountered a group of men taking on fictional lives amidst the throes of their death sentence. There was the hack-and-slasher, puzzle-solver, actor, adventurer, and the well-rounded competitor, all men who exhibited leadership, diplomacy, intuitiveness, teamwork, consideration, and careful planning... and when all else failed, their weapons came out and it was time to fight or die.

I'm referring to the widely popular Dungeons & Dragons, or D&D, an RPG that requires dice and miniatures as players set out on epic adventures. I was never one for RPGs in the free world, not knowing a single person that played and too on-the-go to sit still through a storyline, dialed into a crude reality that left little room for fantasizing. Then in 2004, after having been on Death Row a few years, I noticed friends of mine routinely gathered in the dayroom corner, clutching pencils like prized possessions as they sat cross-legged before sheets of paper. I'd catch snippets of unfamiliar terms like standard actions and spell duration that made even a mundane like me cast wonder. I watched as dice tumbled end-over-end, eliciting disappointment or cheers. I soon came to learn they were playing D&D and thought, pretending is for fools. Swords, dragons, and magic missiles wouldn't curb the awful feeling of being on Death Row... or would it? The more they whooped like frat boys having a night on the town, the more my curiosity grew, though I swore never to play.

Passing by their game one day, the group's narrator asked me to give his makeshift wheel a spin. I did so once or twice, each time the spinner landing on a random number that sent the players in a hearty uproar. As it turned out, I was playing the role of a fierce red dragon fighting to defend its treasure horde. I was so engrossed in the imagery and excitement that I forgot all about Death Row. The next day I sat amongst them, pencil and paper in hand.

I recently read *When Wizards And Orcs Came To Death Row* (Blakinger, 2023), detailing the dismal living conditions of Texas Death Row and how some found recess through D&D. I was honored to know there were others courageous enough to participate in RPGs, a practice that has reformative components, building character and rapport that can change the prison dynamic in most positive ways. In D&D, players select characters of various races - my first character was an elf named Lucky. That in itself helps stimulate an awareness of cultural diversity while embracing ethnic differences. Players use statistics in numerical ranks to determine capabilities, teaching us the importance of following rules as many of us come from backgrounds unrestricted by guidelines, setting our course to prison. Some scenarios require fast-talking tactics while others give cause to run, instilling in us the confidence to speak up in critical moments while chucking our egos aside. And while RPGs are an efficient way to develop social skills, tasking players to employ accountability and etiquette, there is the menacing side that skeptics fear will continue to nurse poor, criminal behavior. I contend the pros far outweigh the cons.

A big misconception is that D&D is reserved for geeks and nerds; both highly offensive terms and inaccurate, as D&D is inclusive and enjoyed by all types of people. I began running my own game in 2004 just to make the theme more relatable. I knew little medieval terminology, but I could weave together one helluva story. Therefore, I replaced carriages with luxury cars, gold nuggets with dollar bills, and taverns became nightclubs. I traded in castle deeds for high rise flats and discarded chainmail armor for designer jackets. The results were games attended by players who previously believed RPGs were childish, many of them urban Black men like myself.

RPGs are temporary reprieves from prison, linear reminders of our civilian lives. Here, we have coined our D&D circle 'The Bubble' because of the state of seclusion it provides. We're locked so deeply into our character roles during the game that Death Row becomes no more than a distant bother we'll return to sometime later in the day.

The real wonder is why more prison administrations do not support RPGs, failing to recognize its productive benefits (Trumbo, 2018). Many States have banned D&D and other RPG material, citing "...it could lead to gang behavior and undermine prison security" (Singer v. Raemisch). True, RPGs can be influential in fostering criminal behavior and some cases are related to D&D (State v. Meyers), still, there is no denying its positive effects as many experts recommend role playing in repairing human relations. One such psychologist was Dr. Peter Kuhn who was instrumental in starting the D&D club for NC Death Row. Each week, some 20-30 of us men reported to a dorm designated for RPGs, 5-6 games held simultaneously as we're huddled together in adventure mode, putting Death Row far in the rear. Not one policy violation was ever recorded, not one hostile incident - rather it established the sort of cohesiveness where rehabilitation happens. Unfortunately, with the termination of programs in 2016, our D&D club got the ax; nothing to do with the RPGs, just in-house disputes between custody and programs in which the club was collateral damage. We had to go back to hosting individual games in our assigned dorms - not the same powerful aesthetic as when we were a D&D club, but the reprieve is the same. The Bubble has been a sanctuary for us whose punishment is unrelenting. In the fantasy world, we're armed with perseverance and wear cloaks of second chances. It's my hope that more prison communities will turn to RPGs and partake in their redeeming qualities because The Bubble isn't confined to NC and Texas Death Row, it stretches everywhere.

Blakinger, K. (2023, August 31). How some men play Dungeons & Dragons on Texas' death row. *The Marshall Project*. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2023/08/31/dungeons-and-dragons-texas-death-row-tdcj>

Trumbo, D. R., Sr. (2018, October 26). What happens when prisoners and guards switch roles. *The Marshall Project*. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2018/10/25/freaky-friday-prison-style>