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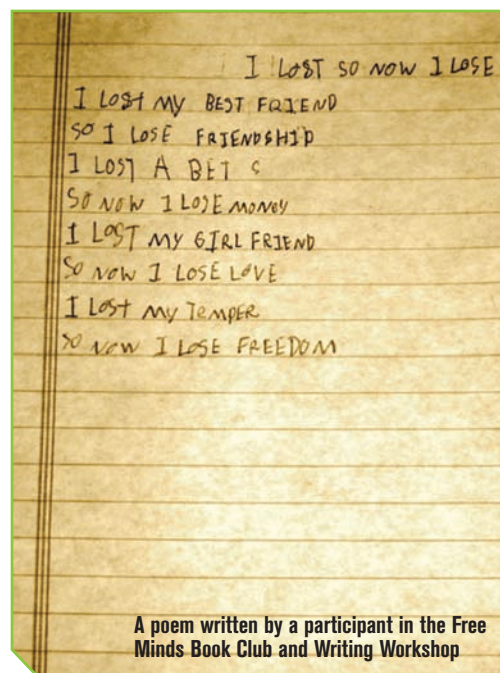


Decario, a former participant in the Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop.



Non-Profit Profile

Prisoners Find Release through Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop



BY KENDRA LANGDON JUSKUS

"If you could really see me/You would not be afraid of me."

The opening lines to the poem "Wrong Sight of a Young Black Man," written by 17-year-old "JP," express the disconnect between perception and true identity that many youth experience. But not every young person is able to give a voice to the thoughts and feelings and stories that define his or her life. "JP," although he is an inmate at the DC jail, is a participant in the Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop. Through the work of this literary non-profit, he and hundreds of other young inmates have found freedom from their imprisonment by reading others' stories of empowerment and creating their own.

"Books can take you anywhere you want to go, especially for these kids – their bodies are locked up, but their minds can go anywhere with a book." So says Kelli Taylor, founder and executive director and program coordinator of Free Minds. As a former journalist and produc-

er, Taylor made a documentary on Glen McGinnis, a man who was on death row in Texas for a crime he had committed at the age of 17. Taylor and McGinnis developed a friendship that included, in part, exchanging books and writing letters about the insights and lessons the two discovered through their reading.

"It was an amazing friendship because we could not have been more different," says Taylor, "but his letters would be six, seven pages long and mine would be the same, so I got to know a lot more about how many of our country's kids are getting locked up without a chance for education."

After McGinnis was executed in 2000, Taylor and Free Minds Deputy Director and Program Coordinator Tara Libert started Free Minds. Georgetown Law School's DC Street Law Clinic connected Taylor and Libert with an opportunity to work with 16- and 17-year-old inmates sentenced as adults at the DC jail, where, at the end of November 2002, the first Free Minds Book Club meeting was held. Since then, the book club has met with approximately 12 young men every Friday, during which time participants discuss a book, talk about its themes and messages and then participate in a writing exercise.

"They're being told 24-7 what to do, where to go and what not to do, and nobody's asking them what they're thinking about anything," says Taylor about why writing, in addition to reading, becomes so important to these young men. "But to be able to put down what you think and what you feel is so empowering." Free Minds hosts an annual poetry reading where young men who have re-entered the community perform their writing for an audience. This is another empowering step for them, as they realize that others want to hear and learn from them.

Although participants only meet for book club once a week, Taylor and Libert meet one-on-one with individuals every Wednesday. Participants also correspond with pen pals who encourage them in their reading, writing and broader educational and life goals. When a participant is moved to another facility, the Free

Minds community supports him through regular correspondence or, if he is released, by connecting him with the networks and resources he needs to pursue his goals outside of incarceration.

Participants choose their reading material, which frequently focuses on issues of crime, poverty or athletics. But Taylor likes to encourage books, poetry, memoirs or short stories in which a character goes through a transformation, since that's what many of these young men experience through Free Minds. When they have completed their time, some Free Minds participants go on to complete GED programs or receive vocational training. Others enter college or full-time employment. Many continue to write.

"Reading and writing have the power to do so much," says Taylor. "They have the power to change lives."

For these young men, some of whom have never read a book cover-to-cover when they enter the program but who finish their sentences writing a novel or pursuing a career, this statement is no exaggeration.

"Encourage me/Encourage me to be a better person," writes "JP" at the close of his poem. "All that you see is what this environment made me be/But one day you'll see the best man that I strived hard to be."

To learn more about Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop, or to get involved, visit www.freemindsbook-club.org or call 202-468-4809. ■

The World I Grew Up In

by Robert

I came up in a world of negativity that burns
 In a society of the wicked and poor that churns
 Where there were no corners to turn
 This is what I learned
 To go on doing how I felt
 Feeling that no consequences was supposed to be dealt
 When harm and hurt was funny from the hand I deal
 A heart that wanted to respond but was taught not to feel
 Where no mercy or remorse was power
 That made people think before they tackled that brick tower

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