



Go to Jail

Confronting a System of Oppression

Students at the Center

2021

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INTRODUCTION

BY KALAMU YA SALAAM

Students at the Center (SAC) wants every high school student to go to jail. Not be sentenced to do time for committing a crime. Not arrested for a false charge that they did not do, nor penalized with long-term incarceration for petty crimes. No, none of that madness that currently is symbolic of America's criminal justice system. What we want is for every student to study, understand and respond to the reality of crime and punishment in our society today.

America is number one in the world in terms of incarceration. Louisiana is number one in the United States. New Orleans is number one in Louisiana. We are ground zero for incarceration and young people need to understand this reality.

How did New Orleans become number one for incarceration and how does this affect all of us, especially those of us in low-income communities of color? These conditions are not accidental. Our conditions are systemic, the results of specific social systems and practices. We may be born poor, but we are kept in poverty by very specific laws and social conditions.

The big temptation is simply to say the solution is to get out of the ghetto. When we listen to popular music, we constantly hear the mantra of getting paid, clocking big bank, and look how much I got. For those of us without education and without social access to wealth networks, the main way to make it big is either sports, entertainment or crime.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of us don't have the natural talent to be a world-class athlete or entertainment superstar. Think of all the high school ball players you knew. How many of them ended up in the pros? Listen to all the people in the choir. How many of them ever enjoy record deals and/or movie roles?

Now think of all the young people you know who sling drugs, or who shoplift, and/or who come up with all kinds of schemes to make money. There are many more of our friends sowing shady seeds in vain efforts to harvest big bucks, but like their peers in sports and entertainment, the end result is failure. Most of the teenage crooks end up as adult inmates in somebody's prison and that's no accident. The increasing and horrendous incarceration of young people is not a textbook case of crime doesn't pay. Although the hidden factors causing high incarceration are not initially clear to most of us, this issue is systemic and far from the inevitable result of a failure of personal responsibility.

Indeed, the truth is: crime does pay. As more and more of the criminal justice system is privatized, the bottom line is that incarceration has become a profitable business in the twenty-first century. When viewed against the backdrop of a dangerously wide and ever-increasing gap between those who revel in wealth and those who languish in poverty, high incarceration rates endemic to low-income communities of color are actually systemic and not simply the result of personal individual failure. It's not simply that our parents fail us, but rather that this society intentionally jails us.

Systemic poverty and resultant high incarceration rates combine to form a social reality that is hard to change. The difficulties of dealing with this social reality are what literally tens of thousands of young people are forced to grapple with on a daily basis.

At SAC we believe and practice confronting rather than avoiding our social reality. It is not enough to run away from the problem. We need to address the problem directly.

Of course, the big question is: what is the problem? In very specific terms, what is our problem? The best way to answer this question is to do some investigation before we offer a response and simplistic solutions. Let's look at the history of our condition. Let's analyze the forces at work that keep us in poverty as well as proactively identify the forces working to erase poverty among us. Once we have made a fact-based diagnosis then we can propose realistic solutions to our problem. Let's look at our position within the larger society before we leap to conclusions about how to get ahead in today's world.

Shame and silence are big obstacles we must confront and overcome in order to begin and complete a close look at poverty. Nobody is proud of being poor. Nobody feels good about not having enough money to survive and develop. We make jokes about welfare and poverty, but we also end up feeling very, very badly about being poor. We try to hide our poverty from ourselves and from each other. Too often we are literally ashamed of ourselves, and this shame encourages us to be silent about our poverty. Besides, everybody has their own problems. Nobody wants to hear us crying about our problems.

But as feminist author Audre Lorde has noted, if we keep quiet about our pain, they will tell people we enjoy our conditions. The real shame of silence is that our silence is used to co-sign our oppression. The SAC pedagogy is to remove the shame of silence by encouraging students to speak out, to document and to analyze the very real conditions of their lives. We want to destroy the silence of shame, or as Black Arts poet Haki Madhubuti, aka Don L. Lee, titled one of his books: Don't Cry, Scream!

Let's holler loudly about the criminal justice system and how it affects our lives. Let's tell how each of us are affected, not just inmates but also family and friends. Let's hear all the voices. Let's look at the total picture. Let's work together to find a solution to our problems of poverty.

Let us not be ashamed of being poor. Let us not be silent about what we suffer. Let us not moan and groan about our conditions. In the words of a previous movement, let's scream and shout, and turn this mother out!

WRITE ON! READ ON! It's Time To Go To Jail.

GOING TO JAIL WITH STUDENTS AT THE CENTER

BY GEORGE LIPSITZ

In *Go to Jail*, young people and their adult allies tell stories about the ways in which they use improvisation and imagination to refuse the unlivable destinies meted out to them by predatory policing and mass incarceration. Their first-person accounts of their life experiences in a segregated city that locks up more of its residents than any city in the world exposes clearly how the carceral system actually produces many of the problems it purports to prevent. Young people recount repeatedly their experiences with wrongful convictions, unwarranted stops and frisks, nuisance arrests and excessive charges for petty non-violent offenses that lead to fines that working people cannot afford to pay. These unpaid fines leave them in debt which makes them susceptible to additional periods of incarceration. Time spent in jail, even if charges are dropped or defendants are acquitted, lead to job loss, eviction, and family dissolution. Yet what they lack in material resources, the authors in this collection make up for by being resourceful. They delve deeply into the powerful traditions of Black resistance and resilience in New Orleans to author accounts that authorize them to turn the world upside down, to turn the toxic into the tonic, poison into medicine, humiliation into honor, and to make a way where there might seem to be no way. These inversions are improvisations and acts of accompaniment. They are products of an ethic of co-creation that recognizes that a linked fate requires thinking in terms of “we” instead of “me.”

Robert Farris Thompson, the great art historian and scholar of Afro-diasporic world views, identifies acts of overturning as the essence of African ways of knowing and being. Being upside down in the world is not a disadvantage but an enhanced state of consciousness that brings people closer to ancestors who possess the strength, experience, and wisdom that their descendants need. On the pages of this book, the learning community known as Students at the Center turns the world upside down. At a time when it seems as if everyone is asleep, the testimonies in this volume challenge us to wise up and wake up, to stand up and speak up. In this volume, young people who recognize how predatory policing and mass incarceration work to criminalize poverty and destroy greatly needed family and community networks critique the role that the criminal (in)justice system plays in their lives. They engage in respectful and productive dialogue with a wide range of adult interlocutors: with their teachers and parents, with incarcerated inmates and returned ex-offenders, with scholars and social justice activists. They narrate events that run the gamut from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the commonplace to the catastrophic. The youth tell the truth, and in the process, they create a precious and indispensable archive about the everyday costs and consequences of mass incarceration. At the same they construct an archive of collective witness: a repository of evidence about the clarity, creativity, courage, and conviction they have been forced to develop in the face of their community’s relentless displacement and dispossession, in opposition to the ways in which every significant social institution in their lives dismisses them as deficient, deviant, delinquent, detainable, and disposable.

Rather than being shamed into silence, the young people and adults involved in Students at the Center make an art form out of talking back. They recognize that the large numbers of people who get locked up in jail have already been locked out of opportunities so that the unjust enrichments and unearned rewards enjoyed by their oppressors can become locked in. In the processes of disclosing their private pains and personal pleasures to other students, of writing letters to people in prison, of joining social justice movements to fight for those wrongly convicted, and of forging new relations with people they have been taught to fear and despise—with caged inmates and returning ex-offenders—these young writers learn that although oppression and brutality

can often make people unlovable, they can always find something left to love, in themselves and in others.¹

The ways of knowing that permeate the writings in this book have been passed down from their origins in Africa through the Middle Passage, slavery, segregation, and the renewed racism that emerged in reaction to the victories won by the Black freedom movement in the 1960s and 1970s. They revolve around parallel vision and parallel institutions. Parallel vision sees the “what is” but discerns hidden within it the “what can be.” Parallel institutions create mechanisms for deepening democratic self-activity by creating for and among Black people precisely those structures and resources that have been denied to them by the dominant powers in society. The classes coordinated by Students at the Center, from which most of the pieces in this collection emerged, are products of a parallel institution. In response to a school system that preaches relentless competition in order to distinguish the exceptional *few* judged to be worth saving from the disposable *many* judged to be fit only for abandonment and neglect, students in SAC classes work together cooperatively and collectively. In these classes, everybody contributes, and everybody counts. They parallel the existing advanced placement classes in the school system, but proceed from radically different premises. In that way they *enact* the parallel vision that their reading and writing activities *envision*. In the parallel institution of SAC classes, students learn to find value in the devalued neighborhoods in which they live, in the undervalued family networks that sustain their homes and neighborhoods, and in the discarded and discounted men and women locked up in Louisiana’s jails and prisons. They write letters to inmates incarcerated in the state prison in Angola, who in turn honor the value they have come to discern in themselves and in fellow prisoners like Cali—whose artwork adorns the cover of this book. He was an inmate-artist whose suicide provoked those locked up with him to write works of praise for his talent and humanity. The students and their incarcerated correspondents alike recognize that the potential they discover in these degraded and often forgotten people and places cannot simply be found, but rather must be forged through deliberate and determined acts of recognition and reconciliation. The hard conditions and harsh conduct that these students have witnessed throughout their lives preclude them from falling victim to being romantic about realities that have very little romance to them. The conditions of their lives do not allow for naive optimism. The problems they address cannot be wished away or solved simply by reciting simple slogans. These students and their families have been consigned to different forms of social death by every significant institution in their society. Yet rather than give in or give up, they respond to the ever-present threat of collective social death with an ethic of co-creation dedicated to the development of a rich and resourceful social life. The history of Black people in New Orleans has been a history of struggle for survival. They have been confronted historically by relentlessly indecent and unjust acts of suppression and oppression that continue today. Yet the very survival of the people and their struggle offers an inventory of tools for forging a new future. As Ashley Jones writes in this volume, “surviving means a continuous effort to stay strong, to do well, and recover from atrocity.” The school system and the criminal justice system alike constantly chronicle what are believed to be the weaknesses, liabilities, and deficits attached to Black people. On the pages of *Go to Jail*, however, student writers and their adult allies display strengths, skills, and assets. They remind us that people *with* problems are not *the* problem but instead can be the solution because they have honed and refined extraordinary capacities and capabilities in the course of creating the strategies they needed merely to survive. Black people in New Orleans have frequently been broke, but they have never been broken. On these pages, as in the entire span of the Black experience in New Orleans and around the world, a linked fate compels individuals to reach out to each other for help, affirmation and accompaniment. As Wesley Alexander writes in *Go to Jail* in evaluating his experiences as a high school student making connections through SAC classes with wrongly

¹ In Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lena Younger confronts her daughter Beneatha at the moment when she is about to disown her brother as no longer worthy of love and tells her that “there is always something left to love.” Tricia Rose has built upon this statement to craft arguments about the importance of interpersonal justice and mutual recognition in Black communities. See Tricia Rose, “Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* and the ‘Illegible’ Politics of (Inter)personal Justice,” *Kalfou* 1.1 (2014): 27–60.

convicted Angola inmate Jerome Morgan, “There are times in our lives when we may feel helpless and forget that there are those connected to us who will not give up on us.”

The educators who deploy the interactive and improvisational student-centered and project-based pedagogy of Students at the Center classes seek to flip the script, to turn things upside down. They create classes where listeners become speakers, readers become writers, and spectators become actors. In a course of study aimed at education for liberation rather than mainstream socialization, student writers become urban alchemists, turning disadvantage into advantage. The makers and shakers, the owners and investors, the comfortable and the complacent in this society do not see the Black and Vietnamese children in SAC classes as present or potential experts, imaginative analysts, or self-active citizens capable of forging a future just society. They do not invite young people like these to think about—or act upon—the problems caused by mass incarceration. They do not ask them to enter the rooms where deliberative talk takes place and decisions are made. Yet as evidenced on the pages of this book, the students have invited themselves. In their writing, they announce their existence as critical thinkers and creative problem solvers. As eyewitnesses to the criminalization of poverty, to the systematic evisceration of the social wage, and to the deadly consequences of prioritizing punishment ahead of justice, these students have expert knowledge and an enhanced ability to solve serious social problems. In *Go to Jail* they advance the ideas and analyses they have learned from participating in parallel institutions that teach practices of democratic deliberation and decision making. They challenge the effects of the physical prisons that are made up of stone walls and iron bars, but they also offer an alternative to the mental prisons that constrain the imagination and lock people into futile and self-defeating “anti-crime” policies that actually produce more problems than they prevent. As Hasina Ashe writes in this book, “I do not know the answers to all the questions I have – and I may never, but I do know that there is more than one type of prison in this country and that immediate change is needed.”

The Students at the Center learning process not only gives young people the *opportunity* to write; it teaches them that they have a *responsibility* to write. The Afro-diasporic networks of instruction and apprenticeship that have nurtured them and their teachers have taught them that every problem has a solution, that meaningful work in the world can make a difference. At one class session that I attended in 2014, a student was asked if writing openly and honestly about fights inside her family and about her disappointments with some loved ones made her fearful that she was exposing embarrassing things that she might prefer to keep hidden. She replied that she was not afraid to write because “you never know who can help me.” Then after a long pause, she added, “or who I can help.” Her answer reveals a conviction that sharing a burden lessens it, that helping others is an indispensable survival strategy, and that the darkest moments of our despair might also be the first moments of our eventual victory.

Writing is often conducted in solitude, but never in isolation. As literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin insists, there is never a true monologue in writing. Every utterance answers something that came before and provokes something that follows. Every word we use is at least half someone else’s, shot through with implications, ideologies and intentions. Narrative devices by skilled authors can hide the quintessentially social nature of the written word. They frequently tell one story from one point of view. This book proceeds from very different premises and practices. It presents a sprawling—and even at times ungainly—conversation that is collectively authored. It is like a town meeting, filled with different voices and diverse perspectives. Sometimes it is marked by repetition and contradiction. It is an archive of collective witness created by a community called into being by writing and speaking, formed by improvisation and invention.

The editorial collective in charge of putting this book together could have imposed a unity that would make *Go to Jail* read more like other books. We could have foregrounded the most accessible and eloquent pieces and dispensed with the rest. We could have identified one core argument and deleted all of the observations and opinions that did not advance it. To do so, however, would have altered the *matter* of the book in a way that

betrays the *manner* in which it was created. Every piece of writing in *Go to Jail* reflects part of a larger totality, a collective conversation carried on in classrooms and court rooms, in prisons and private dwellings, in performance spaces and on the streets in social movement mobilizations. That is the manner in which the book was created, and in keeping with the principles of parallel construction that hold that an object can have more than one meaning, it is also a vital part of its matter.

Because *Go to Jail* is the product of a complex social practice, it produces a new intervention in public life. It can help solve both individual and collective problems. Healing personal injuries can help cure society's ills. This dynamic is displayed most eloquently in the exchanges of letters between wrongfully incarcerated Angola Prison inmate Jerome Morgan and the students and teachers who corresponded with him and fought for his release. Readers can (and should) learn more about Morgan's successful fight for freedom and his subsequent community mentoring and resource building endeavors in the book *Unbreakable Resolve: Triumphant Stories of 3 True Gentlemen* which Morgan co-authored along with Daniel Rideau and Robert Jones. In *Go to Jail*, however, a particular part of his story is illuminated by the letters Morgan exchanged with the SAC learning community. These letters reveal how Students at the Center as a parallel institution inside the school system resonated with the parallel institution of self-activity and mutual aid that Morgan and his allies created inside the prison system. The letters between Morgan and teacher Judy Demarest, and his correspondence with students Wesley Alexander and Tareian King especially reveal how differently positioned individuals can find themselves more alike than different, how new social relations can be created through writing, and how creative acts of improvisation and accompaniment can enable people to forge mutually respectful, beneficial, and even loving relationships.

Morgan was wrongly convicted of a crime that he did not commit, resulting in his unjust incarceration in the state prison in Angola for nearly twenty years. The students came across his case because of the work of Students at the Center teacher and one-time co-director Mosi Makori, who also served as an investigator for the organization Resurrection After Exoneration. For a community that rightly sees itself as at war with the criminal justice system, a wrongly convicted inmate becomes an important symbol of—and an imaginary surrogate for—the “rightly” convicted fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, nephews and neighbors whose incarcerations cannot be so easily mourned or challenged. Because of racially targeted policing and prosecuting, mandatory sentences, and the war on drugs, many of the people in prisons are there because of convictions for non-violent offenses and technical parole violations. A majority of the people locked up in jails like the Orleans Parish Prison, which is described several times in this book, have not even been convicted of any crime. They languish behind bars because they are too poor to pay bail. Some of them have been homeless and many have untreated and even undiagnosed disabilities. Many will have their charges dropped or be acquitted. Others will plead guilty to crimes they did not commit. Those who are found to be guilty often have been convicted of offenses that are as much crimes of condition as they are crimes of conduct. For example, Michelle Alexander notes how the possession of a small amount of drugs on an inner-city street is treated very differently than possession of the same quantity of the same drug in a college fraternity house.² Others who are incarcerated face jail because of fines, fees, and debts that work essentially to criminalize poverty. The students' correspondence with Morgan initially focused on Morgan's innocence. In the process of working together to right a legal wrong, however, Morgan and the students found something even more important than his exoneration. They forged unique relationships with each other based on mutual needs, interests and desires. These changed them as people in profound ways.

In their letters to Morgan, students Wesley Alexander and Tareian King try out new identities. Their careful, tactful and polite epistles introduce themselves to a man they have never met in person. His replies are gentle,

² Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012).

humble, direct, and filled with insight. As they get to know each other through the letters, each writer discovers a void being filled. King and Alexander are children whose fathers are no longer in their lives. Morgan is a father whose incarceration largely severed his connections with his son, a rupture exacerbated by the youth's subsequent displacement to Georgia after Hurricane Katrina. King finds herself relating things in her letters to Morgan that she would tell a father. She starts to describe him as "my new dad." Alexander feels a similarly powerful connection to Morgan. "Growing up in a world that exists beyond the walls of a prison hasn't been so free for me," he writes to the man that he too has come to relate to as a father. "That's why I sympathize and feel connected to you in this abstract way. I too await to one day be set free." The love of these children moves Morgan deeply. He tells them that "we need each other more than we know." When he receives Father's Day cards "from the very two children who have so proudly adopted me as the father they never had," he experiences a new feeling of joy tempered with responsibility. He writes to Alexander that he has found "great joy" and experienced "an authentic happiness in being all that I desire for others to be to me and our people. We have to be fun-loving and serious about affording the world with hope, justice and peace."

King, Alexander, and Morgan counter the system's radical dehumanization with an improvised rehumanization. Faced with consummate political evil, they construct a politicized love. In a society that constantly entices people to *have* more and to *want* more, they have discovered a way to *be* more. Their ties to each other make them strong. They follow in the footsteps of their ancestors who habitually expressed their love for each other during slavery and after emancipation by citing the part of Proverbs 27:17 that says, "as iron sharpens iron so one person sharpens another." As Alexander, King, and Morgan adopt each other as imagined family members, they walk in the footsteps of their ancestors who were forced to form families by invention and imagination. Africans enslaved in America or shackled by sharecropping and Jim Crow after legal slavery ended, often gave their children names taken from the Bible to designate those Biblical personages as "adopted" ancestors to replace the kinship ties with Africa that had been severed by the middle passage. They formed informal families forged from necessity when blood relatives were not around. These actions filled personal needs, but they also worked to enable the entire community to survive. As musicologist Christopher Small writes about the history of Afro-diasporic cultural practices, "the supreme value lies in the preservation of the community: without a community for support the individual is helpless, while with it he or she is invincible."³ In *Go to Jail*, Morgan, King, and Alexander "adopt" each other as kinfolk, not because of shared blood lines, but through recognition of a linked fate authored by racist histories of bloodshed.

In a previous book that SAC published, the community's co-founder and co-teacher Kalamu ya Salaam ruminated about the significance of its teaching and writing. Even then it was clear that the relentless push toward privatization of the school system that developed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina meant that SAC might not last long as a parallel institution within the school system. Its emphasis on portfolios of student writing conflicted with the audit system of educational privatization that treats classes almost exclusively as sites to coach students to perform well on standardized tests. SAC's small classes, emphasis on the student as writer, the labor-intensive teaching its pedagogy requires, and the group's refusal to honor the exceptional and abandon the disposable, all marked it as unlikely to continue forever. Yet there was still value, Salaam insisted, in doing things the right way as long as possible, in giving students and the community experience with a genuinely Afro-diasporic pedagogy and curriculum. Even more important, it would leave a record of what Black people actually thought and did, what they said about themselves rather than what was said about them by others. The writings SAC has produced over the years, especially its books *Who Am I? The Long Ride*, *Men We Love Men We Hate*, *Next Steps*, *Ways of Laughing*, and *Pedagogy, Policy and the Privatized City* constitute an archive of the group's resistance against—and alternatives to—neoliberal regimes of racialized subordination. They show that Black

³ Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in African-American Music* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1998), 86.

students and teachers had a vision of education that conflicted radically with the “drill and kill” mentality of the system. “We have to tell the story,” ya Salaam explained. “I don’t believe we’re going to win this one. I really do not believe we’re going to win this one. But I do believe the story is important. We have to tell our story.”⁴ *Go to Jail* tells that story again. It will preserve the archive of its tellers no matter what happens to Students at the Center as an institution.

Jazz pianist McCoy Tyner has often said that “pressure creates diamonds.”⁵ The beautiful gems scattered throughout this book have been produced at the crossroads of domination and resistance, oppression and affirmation, intolerable subordination and irrepressible self-activity. In this volume students become society’s teachers. They instruct readers that we can never be free as long as we put so many people in jail. They show us how fetters and chains can be tools for liberation if used in the correct way. Above all, the writings on these pages teach us that love can be a revolutionary force. That is the message of this book. We have to love these children and the millions of others like them to the exact dimension and degree that the society demeans and despises them. Yet we also have to listen to them directly and learn from them diligently. In this book, and in many other places, young people have shown us who they are and what they can do. They demonstrate, as Jerome Morgan argues, that many people who are *not* in prison are nonetheless incarcerated, contained and constrained, and they need to be set free.

The calculated cruelty that permeates our society produces enormous suffering. It is depressing to consider the depths, duration and dimensions of white supremacy and racialized capitalism. But it is not at all depressing to see new generations come on the scene armed with knowledge and a determination to struggle. The confidence and creativity that these students display in this book confirm Kalamu ya Salaam’s judgment that “changing our world for the better is exhilarating.” The young people are on the move. Our job is to learn from them, to support them, and to move with them. As Jerome Morgan reminds us in *Go to Jail*, no matter what happens inside the school system, “the school of life is in session.”

⁴ Kristin L. Buras with Jim Randels, Kalamu ya Salaam, and Students at the Center, *Pedagogy, Policy, and the Privatized City: Stories of Dispossession and Defiance from New Orleans* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010), 39.

⁵ Qtd. in Steven L. Isoardi, *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 18.

THE SYSTEM

LOUISIANA PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX BY THE NUMBERS

BY BILL QUIGLEY⁶

- 1 The United States is number one in the world in the rate of putting its people in jail. 2.2 million people are currently behind bars, a 500% increase over the past 30 years.⁷
- 1 Louisiana is number one among 50 US states in putting its people in jail.⁸
- 1 New Orleans is number one among the 64 Parishes of Louisiana in putting its people in jail.
- 1 Louisiana has the highest percentage of prisoners serving life without parole. It is in fact the only one of the 50 states where more than 10 percent of its prisoners are serving life without parole. In Texas, less than 1 percent are serving life without parole.⁹
- 2 In the last two decades, Louisiana's prison population has doubled.¹⁰
- 2 Spending on Corrections in Louisiana has doubled from 4.4 percent of the state budget to 8.7 percent since 1986.¹¹
- 3 The chance of a Black male born in 2001 going to prison in the US is 3 out of 10 if current incarceration rates remain unchanged. The rate for Latino males is less than 2 out of 10. The chance for white males is less than 1 in 10.¹²
- 5 Louisiana puts 5 times more of its people in jail than Iran.¹³
- 7 In New Orleans, one of every 7 men is either in jail or on parole or probation.¹⁴
- 13 Louisiana puts 13 times more of its people in jail than China.¹⁵
- 14 In New Orleans one of every 14 black men is in jail or prison.¹⁶
- 20 Louisiana puts 20 times more of its people in jail than Germany.¹⁷

⁶ Bill Quigley teaches law at Loyola University New Orleans. For those interested in more, please see "Louisiana Incarcerated: How We Built the World's Prison Capital," *The Times-Picayune* 2012 series, online at <http://bit.ly/NOLAPrisonSeries>.

⁷ The Sentencing Project, "Incarceration," <http://www.sentencingproject.org/issues/incarceration/>.

⁸ Cindy Chang, "Louisiana is the World's Prison Capital," *The Times-Picayune*, May 13, 2012. <http://bit.ly/2MRBzED>.

⁹ Cindy Chang, "Angola Inmates are Taught Life Skills, then Spend their Lives Behind Bars," *Times-Picayune*, May 15, 2012, <http://bit.ly/2BMflgX>.

¹⁰ Chang, "Louisiana is the World's Prison Capital."

¹¹ Michael Mitchell and Michael Leachman, "Changing Priorities: State Criminal Justice Reforms and Investments in Education," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, October 28, 2014, <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=4220>.

¹² Thomas P. Bonczar, "Prevalence of Imprisonment in the US Population 1974-2001," Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 2003, <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/piusp01.pdf>.

¹³ Chang, "Louisiana is the World's Prison Capital."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

- 64** Nearly two thirds of Louisiana’s prisoners, 64 percent, are nonviolent offenders compared to the national average of less than half.¹⁸
- 66** 66% of crack cocaine users are white or Latino but 80% of the people sentenced in federal court for crack are African Americans.¹⁹
- 75** Seventy five percent of the over 5000 prisoners at Angola, the maximum-security Louisiana State Penitentiary, are serving sentences of life without parole.²⁰
- 86** Louisiana puts one of every 86 of its adults in jail, double the US average.²¹
- 97** In East Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the odds of a death sentence are 97% higher for those whose victim was white than for those whose victim was black.²²
- 182** The Louisiana prison industry is a \$182 million dollar a year business.²³
- 373** Louisiana increased its prison population by 373 percent between 1978 and 2013 adding over 32,000 prisoners.²⁴
- 847** Around 847 out of every 100,000 people in Louisiana are in jail, the highest among the 50 states. Mississippi is the next highest of the 50 states at 692 people per 100,000 residents. The US average is 478.²⁵
- 2,805** The US imprisons 2,805 out of every 100,000 black males in the US. The rate for white males is 466 and Hispanic is 1,134.²⁶ South Africa, under apartheid, incarcerated about 368 black males per 100,000 people.²⁷
- 4,755** There are 4,755 adults incarcerated for life in Louisiana’s state prisons, 97 percent are men, 73 percent are African American.²⁸
- 5,000** About 5000 black men in New Orleans are in prison compared to about 400 white men from the city.²⁹
- 5,001** Five thousand and one inmates live at Angola State Penitentiary.³⁰

¹⁸ Charles M. Blow, “Plantations, Prisons and Profits,” *New York Times*, May 25, 2012, <https://nyti.ms/2BO9Ga9>.

¹⁹ Marc Mauer, Sentencing Project, Testimony for Congress, May 21, 2009, <http://bit.ly/MarcMauer>.

²⁰ Cindy Chang, “Angola Inmates are Taught Life Skills.”

²¹ Cindy Chang, “Louisiana is the World’s Prison Capital.”

²² Glenn L Pierce and Michael L. Radelet, “Death Sentencing in East Baston Rouge Parish, 1990–2008.” *Louisiana Law Review* 71 (2011): 670. Online at: <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/PierceRadeletStudy.pdf>.

²³ Cindy Chang, “Louisiana is the World’s Prison Capital.”

²⁴ Michael Mitchell and Michael Leachman, “Changing Priorities.”

²⁵ E. Anne Carson, “Prisoners in 2013,” September 2014 published by the US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, rev. September 30, 2014, <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p13.pdf>.

²⁶ Carson, “Prisoners in 2013.”

²⁷ “Section IV: Global Comparisons,” *Prison Policy Initiative*, http://www.prisonpolicy.org/prisonindex/us_southafrica.html

²⁸ Louisiana Department of Public Safety & Corrections, Demographic Profiles of LIFERS, Fact Sheet, June 30, 2014.

²⁹ Cindy Chang, “Louisiana is the World’s Prison Capital.”

³⁰ Cindy Chang, “Angola Inmates are Taught Life Skills.”

7,219 Over 7000 prisoners in Louisiana are over the age of 50.³¹

23,000 It costs the state an average of \$23,000 a year for each inmate at Angola.³²

39,298 Louisiana has 39,298 people in jails and prisons as of the last count by the US Department of Justice.³³

69,000 In addition to the 39,000 plus people in jails and prisons, Louisiana has over 41,000 people on probation and another 28,000 plus on parole.³⁴

1,000,000

It will cost Louisiana more than \$1 million in taxpayer funds for each young person in Angola sentenced to serve life without parole if he lives to 72 years of age, the Louisiana average life expectancy for males. Over 4500 prisoners in Louisiana are serving sentences of life without parole.³⁵

20,000,000

It costs Louisiana over \$20 million each year to incarcerate people for marijuana offenses.³⁶

24,000,000

It costs Louisiana over \$24 million each year to care for its 300 and 400 really sick prisoners.³⁷

27,000,000

Sales of over \$27 million were reported from prison businesses like manufacturing soap, mattresses, furniture, and raising corn, wheat soybeans, cows and horses, reported by the Louisiana Department of Corrections.³⁸

713,000,000

Louisiana budgeted \$713,255,364 for running its prisons, probation and parole for one year.³⁹ Nearly a third of that money goes to for-profit prisons.⁴⁰

³¹ Louisiana Department of Public Safety & Corrections, Demographic Profiles of Geriatric Correctional Population, Fact Sheet, June 30, 2013.

³² Cindy Chang, "Louisiana is the World's Prison Capital."

³³ Carson, "Prisoners in 2013."

³⁴ Louisiana Department of Public Safety & Corrections, Demographic Profile of Adult Probation & Parole Population, Fact Sheet, June 30, 2014.

³⁵ Cindy Chang, "Angola Inmates are Taught Life Skills."

³⁶ Louisiana Senator J.P. Morrell, Dillard University Conference, April 2, 2015.

³⁷ Cindy Chang, "Louisiana is the World's Prison Capital."

³⁸ Prison Enterprises, Fiscal Year 2011-2012.

³⁹ Breakdown of Budgeted Costs by Function, Fiscal Year 2014-2015, as per Act 15.

⁴⁰ Cindy Chang, "Louisiana is the World's Prison Capital."

THE LOUISIANA STATE PENITENTIARY AT ANGOLA PLANTATION: A TIME-LINE OF LABOR, INCARCERATION, & RESISTANCE

BY LYDIA PELOT-HOBBS

- 1812** Louisiana secured statehood. State prisoners were housed in New Orleans Parish Prison until the Baton Rouge facility became operational in 1835. The Baton Rouge Penitentiary was the first prison in Louisiana solely for state prisoners.
- 1830s** The land that was to become the Angola Penitentiary was purchased by Isaac Franklin from Francis Routh with the profits from his slave trading firm, Franklin and Armfield, as four contiguous plantations: Panola, Belle View, Killarney and Angola.
- 1832** The Louisiana legislature passed an act to begin construction of a state penitentiary in Baton Rouge. In August, the state purchased eight acres from Raphael Legendre and John Buhler in the Devall town area of Baton Rouge for \$800. The Louisiana State Prison in Angola later replaced this institution in the twentieth century.
- The penitentiary was originally designed to house 100 convicts in individual cells measuring 6 x 3.5 feet. The 1832 act increased this size to 7 x 3.5 feet.
- To cut costs, 100 state New Orleans Parish Prisoners were sentenced to hard labor and moved to Baton Rouge to build the prison, along with a warden, 10 guards, and several assistants.
- 1833** Construction began on the penitentiary (June). Soon after, state inspectors suggested that convicts be used as laborers to manufacture cotton bagging. Materials produced by the convicts could be sold to pay for their upkeep.
- 1834** A prison store and store clerk housing were added to the original prison design.
- 1835** With completion of the Upper Cell house, Louisiana gained its first state penitentiary.
- 1838** End of penitentiary construction. The main compound area consisted of a U-shaped, three story brick structure and wall, an upper cell house with 240 cells, a lower cell house with 200 cells, as well as a prison yard, garden, and workshop area. Each brick-floored cell contained a solid iron door with iron bars that opened less than a foot. Cells contained no beds or cots. They were poorly ventilated and virtually unheated in winter.
- 1840** Business operations at the prison were expanded to include cloth manufacturing, tailoring, tanning, manufacturing side saddles, carpentry, cabinet making, joinery, painting, forge work, gun and watch repairs. Local merchants complained about prison labor driving down price competition for merchandise.
- 1841** A fire in November of 1841 forced the closing of some business operations and caused \$10,000 in damages. Demolition and rebuilding of the northern wing by prisoners began.
- 1844** Louisiana legislature bowed to pressure from local merchants and passed an act forbidding the sale of convict-manufactured foods that competed directly with goods produced outside the prison.

In October 1844, the state leased the prison facility and all the prisoners in it to James A. McHatton and William Pratt for a five-year period for \$25,000. Prisoners' labor under this lease included levee construction under hazardous conditions. Many slave owners would not allow slaves to engage in

levee work because of high death rates. Leased prisoners died from overwork and exposure, yet this practice continued until the twentieth century.

- 1846** Isaac Franklin's widow, Adelia, acquired ownership of the plantations that were to become Angola. Adelia gained ownership of the land after filing suit against Franklin's brothers, to whom he had attempted to leave the property. In 1849, Adelia married Joseph Alexander Smith Acklen, but only after he signed a prenuptial agreement specifying her rights to the Louisiana plantations. Together, the Acklens were the wealthiest couple in Louisiana and Tennessee. They owned many plantations and thousands of slaves and went on to build Belmont Mansion in Nashville as a summer home (completed 1853). This mansion later became part of Ward-Belmont College, a woman's college. When Joseph died in 1863 at Angola Plantation (the original), Adelia famously sneaked her cotton through Civil War battle zones in order to get it to European markets, where she could make a profit.
- 1847** A new two-story brick factory building was completed, including shops for making ropes on the first floor and shops for spinning warp and filling bags on the second floor. In 1853, a third floor was added.
- 1849** McHatton and Pratt's lease of prison facilities and prisoners expired and was picked up by McHatton, Ward & Co.
- 1852** Disputes about terms and profits of this lease led to a resolution that the state would get 25% and the lessee 75% of profits from prison labor.
- 1855** The Vagrancy Act of 1855 persecuted any unemployed person:

All idle persons who, not having visible means to maintain themselves, live without employment; all persons wandering abroad and lodging in groceries, taverns, beer houses, market places, sheds, barns, uninhabited buildings, or in the open air, and not giving a good account of themselves; all persons wandering abroad and begging, or who go about from door to door, or place themselves in the streets, highways, passages, or other public places, to beg or receive alms; habitual drunkards who shall abandon, neglect or refuse to aid in the support of their families, and who may be complained of by their families, shall be deemed vagrants (Act 120, 1855, 149)

It shall be the duty of any sheriff, constable, policeman, or other peace officer, whenever required by any person, to carry such vagrant before a justice of the peace of any parish, or before any one of the recorders of the city in which he shall be, for the purpose of examination; and if the justice or other officer be satisfied by the confession of the offender, or by competent testimony, that he is a vagrant within the description aforesaid, he shall make a certificate of the same, which shall be filed with the clerk of the court of the parish, and in the city of New Orleans the certificate shall be filed in the office of one of the recorders; and the justice or other officer shall issue a warrant to commit such vagrant, if in the city of New Orleans, to the workhouse of the city, for any time not exceeding six months, there to be kept at hard labor; or if such vagrant be a proper object of charity, to some place of refuge to be provided by the Common Council of the city; and if in any of the parishes, to the parish jail for not more than six months, and if such vagrant be a proper object of charity, to such place of refuge as shall be provided by the parochial authorities.

... All persons who shall be convicted a second time of any of the offenses mentioned in the preceding section, shall be condemned to imprisonment at hard labor for not more than three years,

nor less than six months. All persons harboring vagrants or suspicious persons, knowing them to be such, shall, upon conviction, be fined in a sum not exceeding five hundred dollars nor less than one hundred dollars.

- 1857** A new lease was signed with J.M. Hart and W.S. Pike. It stipulated that all profits would be split evenly between the state and lessee.
- 1858–62** Of male convicts incarcerated in Baton Rouge, those not working on levees were employed in the prison’s weaving room, its show and tailor shops, or the carpentry shop, cooperage, foundry, brick manufacturing plant, or blacksmith shop.
- Lessees employed 28 workers, including 14 guards. Total wages for the entire prison were less than \$1000/month.
- 1862** Convict leasing temporarily ended with the end of the Civil War. On April 1, 1862, Hart and Pike returned the prison facility and inmates to the state. In May, the Louisiana state penitentiary was occupied by the 7th Vermont regiment. In August, the Battle of Baton Rouge caused \$74,219.25 in damages to the penitentiary.
- 1865** The 13th Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution, proclaiming slavery illegal in the United States, except as punishment for a crime.
- Louisiana, like many other Southern states, passed a new vagrancy law that punished “anyone who shall persuade or entice away, feed or harbor any person who leaves his or her employer.” The law was not targeted specifically at migrating black workers, but included a “good behavior” clause that enabled it to be racially interpreted.
- 1866** Louisiana passed a further vagrancy law, used primarily to imprison black men, that made “impudence,” “swearing,” and other signs of “disobedience” into just causes for imprisonment.
- 1867** Prisoners were moved back to the Baton Rouge facility despite extensive damage from the 1862 battle. Prisoners worked in brick kilns at the prison to repair the damage.
- On January 1, 1867 there were 228 convicts. By June 1868, there were 291. Unlike the majority white prisoners before the Civil War, the typical prisoner during the post-war period was a black male laborer under 25 with a sentence of 4 months to one year.
- 1868–9** Convict leasing began again. John Huger and Colonel Charles Jones signed the first postwar lease. The lease was ratified by the Louisiana General Assembly in January 1869, then vetoed by Gov. Henry Warmoth because it supposedly gave the lessee too much control over prisoners’ health and religious education. The lease was finally legalized in March 1869. Immediately after, Huger and Jones sold their company to James, Buckner and Co. for more than \$100,000. This company did not receive state authorization to manage the penitentiary until January 1870, yet it continued to use convict labor from March of 1869 on. During this period, Major James, an ex-confederate officer, made almost \$100,000 from unauthorized levee construction work performed by state convicts.
- 1870** Major James continued to lease prison labor from 1870 until his death in 1894. During this period, conditions at the prison declined due to the fact that the prison board was on James’s payroll.
- 1880** Adelia Acklen joined four plantations on the land that was to soon become Angola Penitentiary and sold them to Major James. Upon acquiring the land, James began to run the plantation with convict labor, leading to new legacies of abuse and profiteering.

- 1890** The McKinley Tariff act nationally banned importation of all forced labor-made products.
- 1891** A storm severely damaged the Louisiana state penitentiary buildings in Baton Rouge, causing the death of twelve inmates.
- An estimated 3000 prisoners died between 1870 and 1901 as a result of over-work.
- 1894** The convict lease was turned over to Major James' estate executors and Samuel L. James, Jr.
- 1896** The convict death rate reached a high of 216 deaths per year.
- 1898** A new state constitution was passed that forbade the leasing of convicts to private firms or individuals after 1901.
- 1901** Louisiana ended the leasing system. Rather than maintaining the aging Baton Rouge facility, the state purchased the 8,000-acre Angola Plantation and the 2800-acre Hope Plantation. Angola Plantation, located about 50 miles Northwest of Baton Rouge, is encircled by the curves of the Mississippi River—an ideal location for shipping products.
- With convict leasing at an end and 1014 convicts at the new plantation penitentiary, a sewing factory reopened and began to produce an estimated 6000-8000 suits of clothing and 5-6 thousand pairs of shoes annually for the prisoners.
- The old state penitentiary in Baton Rouge continued to be used as a receiving station, a hospital, a clothing and shoe factory, as well as a site for executions until it was finally closed in 1917.
- 1907** “All male convicts were divided into four classes, with little regard for age or intelligence and with no regard for number or nature of offences:
- First class men are... sound in every respect and accustomed to manual work. These men are sent to the levee camps where the work is the most severe. Second class men are... of moderate strength and capabilities and are assigned to the sugar plantations... Third-class men are assigned to the cotton plantation [Angola], and forth-class men are assigned to the hospital.
- Antebellum slave owners had divided their work force along similar lines. So had postbellum lessees in states other than Louisiana.”⁴¹
- 1916** The city of Baton Rouge purchased the old penitentiary compound from the state for \$45,000. The state maintained control of the property until January 18, 1918, during which time the state salvaged the site for construction materials for the Angola and Oakley prison facilities.
- Henry Fuqua became General Manager of Angola, fired many security guards and created an inmate “trustee guard” system, a hierarchical overseer system which allowed prisoners to inflict violence on other prisoners who were laboring under their supervision.
- 1922** Major flooding at Angola ruined most crops.
- Fuqua bought 10,000 acres of land, which brought Angola to its present size of 18,000 acres.
- 1926** Beginning in 1926, the Board of Pardons automatically reviewed all people incarcerated with a life sentence for a pardon after serving ten and a half years.

⁴¹ Mark T. Carleton, *Politics and Punishment: The History of the Louisiana State Penal System* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1971), 100.

- 1929** The Convict Labor Act of 1929 placed prison-made products under state laws, thus making it possible for states to ban them.
- 1930s** John Lomax, a folklorist, and his son Alan Lomax, visited Angola during their tours of the U.S. South documenting African-American musical cultures, which were maintained in historic forms at prisons because the prisoners had less access to popular trends. At Angola, the Lomaxes met and recorded performances of the famous blues musician Lead Belly.
- 1933** "... a study of prison records revealed that 1,547 floggings 'with 23,889 recorded blows of the double last' were administered during 1933 alone."⁴²
- After a major prison break resulting in the death of two prison guards, security increased at Angola. The 1934-36 biennial report of the Louisiana State Penitentiary described the changes brought on by the big prison break as well as some 113 escapes between 1932 and 1934. "The September tragedy of 1933 showed clearly that trouble-makers must be segregated and placed under conditions of very definite control," the report said. The result was the infamous Red Hat Cellblock built in 1935. The facility, which got its name from the red hats worn by workers in the tall fields of sugarcane, had 40 cells of reinforced concrete reserved for the incorrigibles.⁴³
- 1940** An amendment to the 1929 Convict Labor Act criminalized all interstate trade and sale of prison made products.
- 1951** Congress adopted the Boggs Act, named for its sponsor, Representative Hale Boggs (D-La.), (husband of Lindy Boggs) which imposed harsh mandatory minimum sentences on those convicted of drug crimes. Five years later, Congress added even more punitive sentences, including the death penalty for drug sales to a minor.
- 1952** 31 inmates cut their Achilles' tendons in protest of violence and the prison's conditions. This caused national news agencies to write stories about Angola. In its November 22, 1952 issue, *Collier's Magazine* referred to Angola as "the worst prison in America."
- 1961** Female inmates were moved to St. Gabriel, the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women.
- A massive increase of brutality and assaults caused Angola to be named "Bloodiest Prison in the South."
- 1965** The Angola Rodeo began.
- 1968** The U.S. Supreme Court case *Lee v. Washington* struck down an Alabama statute requiring permanent and complete racial segregation of prisoners. There was, however, a notable exception in the *Lee* case: "prison authorities have the right, acting in good faith and in particularized circumstances, to take into account racial tensions in maintaining security, discipline, and good order in prisons and jail."
- 1971** Inmates Robert Hillary King (Wilkerson), Albert Woodfox, and Herman Wallace began working to create a prison chapter of the Black Panther Party. Together, they organized prisoners to build a movement to desegregate the prison, end systematic rape and violence, and struggle for better living

⁴² *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴³ Carol Anne Blitzer, "The Evolution of Angola," *The Advocate*, April 24, 2005, <http://bit.ly/2JqSEDm>.

conditions. Using the legal knowledge they gained while in prison, they also helped their fellow inmates file legal appeals.

1972 Prison reformer Elayn Hunt was named Director of Corrections and encouraged by the Edwin Edwards administration to begin a period of major reform at Angola. Hunt ended the controversial “Trusty” guard system.

Woodfox and Wallace were convicted of the stabbing murder of 23-year-old prison guard Brent Miller. No physical evidence linked them to this crime. King was said by authorities to be linked to the murder but was not charged. All three were placed in solitary confinement during this year. Robert King was released in 2001, after 29 years of solitary confinement. Herman Wallace died in 2013, three days after being released from prison. Albert Woodfox was released in 2016 after 43 years in solitary confinement.

1973 The Death Penalty was abolished in Louisiana temporarily, for three years. During this period, everyone on death row was moved to serve life sentences. This move was in part an impetus for courts to elongate sentences.

1975 In response to a lawsuit by prisoners challenging conditions at Angola, federal district courts instructed the state of Louisiana to overhaul the Department of Corrections. The Edwards administration used this as an opportunity to appoint reform-oriented officials to make the changes at Angola. These officials pushed to bring Angola under the umbrella of authority of the Baton Rouge administration. Within 18 months, they had ended the violence, cleaned up the prison, and relieved overcrowding.

However, the new state constitution created in 1975 also eliminated the automatic pardon review at ten years and six months. This meant that while lifers could still be reviewed for a pardon, a more stringent process began to be implemented.

In response to this policy change, Wilbert Rideau, inmate, became the first black editor of *The Angolite*, a free, uncensored prison newspaper featuring in-depth investigations of issues ranging from the effects of various national and state policies on Angola, different governors’ approaches to clemency, sexual assault within Angola, the economics of prisons, and the activities of prison reform organizations. During its 20-year life span, *The Angolite* won several awards including The George Polk Award, the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award and several awards from the American Bar Association and the American Penal Press.

1976 C. Paul Phelps, new Director of Corrections, continued reform and added four new buildings to increase the bed count at Angola.

1979 The Louisiana Legislature completely repealed the “10-6 law,” with retroactive effect frustrating the scores of men at Angola expecting to be pardoned after serving ten years and six months. With this move, Louisiana became one of the few states in the nation to employ only natural life, also known as “life without parole,” in its life sentencing.

Also, the Prison Industry Enhancement Certificate program was enacted as part of the Justice System Improvement Act of 1979. The interstate and international export of prison-made products was again legalized.

1983 In 1972, there were only 193 men serving natural life sentences in Angola. Ten years later, due partly to the trend of elongating sentencing that began with the 1972 temporary abolition of the death penalty and partly to the policies of Republican Governor David Treen, those numbers had

increased to 1,084. There was also a net increase of 128 sentenced prisoners a month in Louisiana. According to Lydia Pelot Hobbs, “While *Angolite* staffers suggested alternatives to incarceration and an increase in clemencies granted to deal with this situation, Governor Treen sought to fix the situation by implementing ‘double-bunking,’ which was housing more prisoners in cells than they were designed for.”⁴⁴ Fortunately, Federal courts rejected this plan. Norris Henderson and Kenneth “Biggie” Johnston, jailhouse lawyers, found the Angola Special Civic Project to address the crisis of life sentencing and to collectively organize “lifers” around this issue.

- 1987** The *Turner v. Safley* decision holds that “when a prison regulation impinges on inmates’ constitutional rights, the regulation is valid if it is reasonably related to legitimate penological interests.” This further placed the burden of proof on prisoners if they believed their constitutional rights had been violated. *Turner vs. Safley* also struck down a Missouri Division of Corrections regulation requiring inmates to appeal to the superintendent of the prison to approve an inmate’s marriage.
- 1990** Incentives began to increase for parish sheriffs to build their own prisons and receive payment of a minimum of \$25 per inmate per day, the profits from which could be spent on the expenses of each parish’s police department. To maximize profits, some sheriffs began to lease the management of prisons to private companies. The rapid increase in the incarceration rates, primarily of African American men from New Orleans, in the 1990s, combined with this new opportunity to make money from the private management of prisons resulted in a rise of private profit and per-diem public revenue throughout Louisiana prisons. There were 19,000 inmates in Louisiana in 1990; in 2010, there were 40,000. Prisons in Louisiana today must be supplied with a constant influx of human beings or the state’s \$182 million incarceration industry will go bankrupt.⁴⁵
- 1992** In *Hudson v. McMillan*, the U.S. Supreme Court held that minor injuries suffered by a handcuffed, shackled inmate beaten by three Louisiana prison guards constituted a violation of the eighth amendment or the right to be “free of cruel and unusual punishment.” The supervisor on duty had watched the beating and told the guards “not to have too much fun.”
- 1993** Sister Helen Prejean, a Catholic nun and anti-death penalty activist, published *Dead Man Walking*, a non-fiction account of death row at Angola.
- 1994** Angola received accreditation from American Correctional Association.
- Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, through which Truth-in-Sentencing Incentive Grants were given to states in exchange for more funding to build additional prisons and jails. Grants were awarded based on a state’s promise that their prisoners would serve out a minimum of 85% of their sentences. Time off for good behavior and parole was thus restricted, and sometimes even eliminated. Louisiana was required to meet the 85% standard. Since 2001, no funds have been appropriated for the Truth-in-Sentencing grants program (NACO and Bureau of Justice).
- 1995** Born-again Christian Burl Cain began his tenure as Warden at Angola.

⁴⁴ Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, “Organizing for Freedom: The Angola Special Civics Project, 1987–1992,” (University of New Orleans MSc Thesis, 2011), 40.

⁴⁵ Chang, “Louisiana Is the World’s Prison Capital.”

- 1996** The Prison Litigation Reform Act places the burden of proof for demonstrating violations of constitutional protections on the inmates, whereas in the past the facility management had to prove they made necessary changes.
- 1998** Warden Cain established the Angola Museum.
- The Farm: Angola USA*, a documentary film, was released. It was directed by Wilbert Rideau, Liz Garbus, and Jonathan Stack.
- 1999** Three prison guards were held hostage by six inmates serving life sentences. One guard and one inmate were killed.
- 2003** After years of work, Friends and Families of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children (FFLIC) helped pass the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2003 (Act 1225). This led to the closing of the notorious Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth in 2004. The Juvenile Justice Reform Act also included the creation of the Juvenile Justice Implementation Committee (JJIC) tasked with overseeing reform, added periodic juvenile placement reviews to ensure that youth are kept in the least restrictive setting, and promoted the development of nationally recognized and accepted standards of practice for local juvenile detention facilities.⁴⁶
- 2005** During Hurricane Katrina, the 6500 prisoners at Orleans Parish Prison (OPP) were held without food and water for several days as the prison flooded. 3,800 of these prisoners were people in jail for things such as traffic violations, parking violations, public drunkenness, begging, blocking the sidewalk (i.e., being homeless), and failure to pay a fine. Many were awaiting trial and had not been convicted of any crime.
- A 2006 ACLU report noted that in the days before Katrina, OPP accepted prisoners, including juveniles as young as 10, from other facilities to ride out the storm, despite Mayor Nagin’s mandatory evacuation of the city. Due to systemic neglect and overcrowding, the prison was not prepared to protect the inmates.
- As floodwaters rose in the OPP buildings, power was lost, and entire buildings were plunged into darkness. Deputies left their posts, leaving behind prisoners in locked cells, some standing in sewage-tainted water up to their chests. Several inmates died trying to escape the rising waters. One prisoner quoted in the report noted:
- All through the time of this you heard screams of terror, cries for help and no one was answered... Most of us was on meds and didn’t receive them. I myself went without my asthma pump and struggling with my breathing severely, being not able to talk and feeling weak. There was smoke everywhere and all you heard all night and early the next day was gunshots. I really felt inside like I was about to die and was left there to die!!
- Several days later, finally evacuated into a large outdoor field, OPP inmates experienced prisoner-on-prisoner violence that went unchecked by guards. Notably, 499 women from OPP were then moved to Angola, a maximum-security male prison, without trial.
- During the days after the flood, a makeshift prison was also set up in the Greyhound bus and train station in downtown New Orleans after the Orleans Parish Prison (OPP) suffered major flooding as

⁴⁶“Youth Justice Reform,” *Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children*, <http://www.fflic.org/juvenile-justice-reform>.

a result of Hurricane Katrina. It was run by Burl Cain, the warden of Angola, as well as prison guards from New York.

Also in 2005, the US Supreme Court case *Johnson v. California* presented a national challenge to equal protection in prisons by challenging a California policy that uses race as a determinative factor in assigning inmates to cells during their first 60 days of incarceration. The court, however, sent the case back to the lower federal courts, ordering them to reconsider it. Previously, the U.S. Court of Appeals for California had upheld the race-based prison segregation policy, citing *Turner vs. Safley*, a 1987 Supreme Court case that permitted prison authorities to limit constitutional rights for the sake of sound prison administration.

2008 Robert King published his autobiography, *From the Bottom of the Heap: The Autobiography of a Black Panther*, with PM Press.

Albert Woodfox and Herman Wallace were finally moved, after 36 years, from solitary confinement to a maximum-security dormitory. However, after Woodfox's successful appeal was overturned, in November 2008 both men were moved out of the dormitory, separated, and placed back in isolation. In 2009 Wallace was moved to Hunt Correctional Center, and in November 2010, Woodfox was moved to David Wade Correctional Center, which is seven hours north of his family and supporters, and was also stripped of his phone and visiting rights.

2009 Under the administration of Governor Bobby Jindal, the prison reduced its budget by \$12 million by "double bunking" (installing bunk beds to increase the capacity of dormitories), reducing overtime, and replacing prison guards with security cameras.

2010 The film *In the Land of the Free*, the story of the Angola 3, directed by Vadim Jean and narrated by Samuel L. Jackson was released. The film features Robert King, telephone interviews with Woodfox and Wallace, and interviews with attorneys and others involved with the cases, including the widow of Brent Miller, who believes the men are innocent of her husband's murder.

BP hired prison labor to clean up its oil spill.⁴⁷

2013 October 1, 2013: Herman Wallace was released after 41 years of solitary confinement. He died from advanced liver cancer three days after his release

⁴⁷ Abe Louise Young, "BP Hires Prison Labor to Clean Up Spill While Residents Struggle," *The Nation*, July 21, 2010, <http://bit.ly/2onpEVL>.

ANGOLA TODAY: FROM SLAVE PLANTATION TO MODERN DAY SLAVERY BY BILL QUIGLEY

Five thousand prisoners live at Angola, the name for the main Louisiana maximum security prison, the Louisiana State Penitentiary.⁴⁸ Over 90 percent of the men serving time there will die there.⁴⁹ The prisoners inside Angola have an average sentence of 93 years.⁵⁰

Angola is the largest maximum-security prison in the United States.⁵¹ The prison covers 18,000 acres or 28 square miles.⁵² Bounded on three sides by the Mississippi River, it is about an hour away from Baton Rouge. The nearest town, St. Francisville, is over twenty miles away. If you leave that town and take Louisiana Highway 66 for twenty-two miles, the highway ends at the front gate of the prison.⁵³

The lands the prisoners live on were once slave plantations. The prison takes its name from the original 8000 acre Angola plantation which was owned by Isaac Franklin and named after the homeland of its first slaves.⁵⁴ In the 1800s, the Angola plantation was used to put prisoners to work planting and picking cotton for the profit of the man who owned the rights to their labors, a former Confederate Major named Samuel James.⁵⁵ Later, three other plantations, Hope, Monticello and Oakley, used mostly for sugar cane, were added to the original Angola plantation to make up what is now the prison.⁵⁶

Inside there are six main fenced areas, called camps. A main prison complex area houses about 2500 prisoners and five other smaller camps hold another 2500 men. Most prisoners at Angola live in buildings which are big open dorms. Each dorm room has beds for 80 inmates, and those 80 men share five bathrooms. There is of course no air conditioning.⁵⁷ Each of the six camps has its own Warden, kitchen, security staff and laundry.⁵⁸

Every prisoner works 8 hours a day 5 days a week unless they are sick or locked down. They work in the fields farming corn, soybeans, wheat, cotton, tomatoes, cabbage, okra, watermelon, onions, beans, and peppers. Others tend cattle or make license plates, mattresses, or mops and brooms.⁵⁹ Field work is done the old-

⁴⁸ Chang, "Angola Inmates are Taught Life Skills."

⁴⁹ James Ridgeway, "God's Own Warden," *Mother Jones*, July/August 2011, <http://bit.ly/31N8Kxf>.

⁵⁰ Patricia Cohen, "Guard Tower and Cell Help Tell 'Unvarnished Truth' of Black America," *International Herald Tribune*, July 11, 2013.

⁵¹ David Oshinsky, "The View from Inside," *New York Times*, June 11, 2010, <https://nyti.ms/347IDCK>.

⁵² Louisiana State Penitentiary, *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louisiana_State_Penitentiary.

⁵³ *The Angola Story*, compiled by the Office of the Deputy Warden/Operations, Louisiana State Penitentiary (March 1999).

⁵⁴ Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory and Property on the Postslavery Plantation* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 2007), ch. 5fn2.

⁵⁵ Louisiana State Penitentiary, *Wikipedia*. See also Carleton, *Politics and Punishment*, 93.

⁵⁶ Carleton, *Politics and Punishment*, 93.

⁵⁷ Chang, "Angola Inmates are Taught Life Skills"; Testimony of Henry James at Loyola Law School September 2, 2014.

⁵⁸ *The Angola Story*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

fashioned way, by hand, with hoes and what is harvested is sold by Prison Enterprises, the business arm of the Louisiana Department of Corrections.⁶⁰

Working conditions today for thousands at Angola are remarkably similar to the days of slavery. One reporter who recently visited Angola observed “In the distance on this day, 100 black men toil, bent over in the field, while a single white officer on a horse sits above them, a shotgun on his lap.”⁶¹

Prisoners are paid up to 20 cents an hour. With that money, prisoners have to pay for their medical care (for example \$7 for sick calls) and purchase their own toothpaste, soap, clothes, shoes, phone calls, extra food and legal copies.⁶²

For decades, even the wardens of the prison admit Angola was worked on a system that “bordered on legalized slavery.”⁶³ Whippings, beatings, brutality and rape were widespread according to the sworn testimony of a nurse who worked there.⁶⁴

It got so bad, that in the early 1950s, thirty seven prisoners slashed the tendons on their own heels to protest harsh treatment at Angola.⁶⁵ In 1952, *Collier's* magazine wrote an article on Angola and called it “America’s worst prison.”⁶⁶ In the 1970s, the American Bar Association, the nation’s largest organization of lawyers, described conditions at the prison as “medieval, squalid and horrifying.”⁶⁷ Inmates complained of the “Red Hat” punishment area where “prisoners were kept naked in dark, damp dungeons and given only spoonfuls of food.”⁶⁸ In 1971, there were 82 stabbings and three inmates died; in 1972 there were 52 stabbings and eight died; in 1973, there were 137 stabbings and 13 died.⁶⁹ In 1975, a federal judge declared the prison in a state of emergency.⁷⁰ At other times it has been called the “bloodiest prison in the south,”⁷¹ and the “Alcatraz of the South.”⁷²

Now Angola remains the nation’s largest prison and the centerpiece for the Louisiana incarceration system which incarcerates tens of thousands of people.

⁶⁰ Liliana Segura, “Dispatch from Angola: Faith Based Slavery in a Louisiana Prison,” *Colorlines*, August 4, 2011, <http://bit.ly/2Wgss3u>.

⁶¹ Laura Sullivan, “Doubts Arise about 1972 Angola Prison Murder,” *NPR*, October 27, 2008, <https://n.pr/31KELWU>.

⁶² Testimony of Henry James at Loyola Law School September 2, 2014.

⁶³ Alan Elsner, “Museum Bears Witness to US Prison’s Bloody Past,” *Reuters*, August 16, 2001.

⁶⁴ Carleton, *Politics and Punishment*, 153.

⁶⁵ Carleton, *Politics and Punishment*, 150–51.

⁶⁶ Carleton. *Politics and Punishment*, 136. Quoting John Lear and E.W. Stagg, “America’s Worst Prison,” *Collier's*, CXXX, November 22, 1952.

⁶⁷ Linda Ashton, “Louisiana Inmates Blame Unrest on Governor: Roemer’s Stinginess with Clemency Has Created ‘Time Bomb,’ Lifers Claim,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1989, <https://lat.ms/32W73iw>.

⁶⁸ Ashton, “Louisiana Inmates Blame Unrest on Governor.”

⁶⁹ Sullivan, “Doubts Arise.”

⁷⁰ Ashton, “Louisiana Inmates Blame Unrest on Governor.”

⁷¹ In the 1960s, Angola was called the bloodiest prison in the south. See history of Angola penitentiary, Alan Elsner, “Museum Bears Witness.”

⁷² Nina Storchlic, “Locked Up in Louisiana: Inside America’s Bloodiest Prison,” *The Daily Beast*, updated July 12, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2BK117w>.

Angola, like the rest of the Louisiana prison system, is big business. According to a recent article in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, the Louisiana “prison system that leased its convicts as plantation labor in the 1800s has come full circle and is again a nexus for profit.”⁷³

It costs the state an average of \$23,000 a year for each inmate at Angola.⁷⁴

Angola employs over a thousand guards and hundreds of others in administrative positions.⁷⁵ About two hundred of the guards and their families live on the grounds of the prison where historically inmates cut their grass, wash their cars and serve them.⁷⁶ “All day long, men in white uniforms are cutting grass, painting houses, planting gardens, free of cost to the prison staff...”⁷⁷

A recent article about Angola describes it as “a modern day slave plantation.” The author, Laura Dimon, wrote “Angola exists in the shadow of slavery, a time when black men did not have rights. In a state with the motto “Union, justice and confidence,” there is certainly a lingering stink of a bygone, ugly era for which “union and justice” is simply not a fitting description.”⁷⁸

⁷³ Chang, “Louisiana is the World’s Prison Capital.”

⁷⁴ Chang, “Louisiana is the World’s Prison Capital.”

⁷⁵ *The Angola Story*; Gary Fields, “Prison’s Guards are Part Wolf, All Business,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 31, 2012, <https://on.wsj.com/2Ne6zxA>.

⁷⁶ Giles Clarke, “Louisiana State Penitentiary Hosts a Rodeo for Its Inmates,” *Vice*, November 15, 2013, <http://bit.ly/2phQrmN>; Segura, “Dispatch from Angola.”

⁷⁷ Sullivan, “Doubts Arise.”

⁷⁸ Laura Dimon, “A Modern Day Slave Plantation Exists, and It’s Thriving in the Heart of America,” *Mic*, May 8, 2014, <http://bit.ly/2Wj6M6C>.

PRISONS MAKE MORE PRISONS: LOUISIANA CARCERAL CRISIS FROM THE 1970S TO HURRICANE KATRINA

BY LYDIA PELOT-HOBBS

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, news circulated about the failure of the city to evacuate Orleans Parish Prison, which is the New Orleans city jail, during the storm. Over the next several months, details emerged about the organized abandonment that produced the overwhelming chaos that left thousands of primarily Black prisoners locked in the flooded jail. Of note to multiple parties, including the ACLU in their critical report, *Abandoned and Abused*, was the extent to which state prisoners, individuals who had already been sentenced and in most other places would be behind bars in a prison, were being housed in OPP.⁷⁹ The ACLU was not the first organization to draw attention to the practice of locking up long-term state prisoners in the city jail. For more than a year prior to the storm, community activists with the Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition (OPPRC) had highlighted that this practice was a key factor in the ballooning of OPP to encompassing over 7,000 beds for a city with a population, prior to Katrina, of only 450,000 residents.⁸⁰ This arrangement has been underwritten and spurred on by a “per diem” state appropriation system whereby rather than having a static yearly operating budget the sheriff department’s funding from both the city and the Department of Corrections is continually in flux based on how many people are behind bars each night.⁸¹ Organizers with OPPRC and others rightfully have pointed out that this system of appropriating funds incentivizes the locking up of more and more individuals and sheriffs’ vying for state prisoners to be placed in their particular jail. This has contributed to not only the growth of OPP leading up to the storm, but the crisis of mass incarceration facing Louisiana as a whole.

To understand what produced this state of affairs, it is imperative that we go back to another man-made disaster, the crisis that overtook the Louisiana penal system during the 1970s.⁸² In this moment, the problems and contradictions that had been accumulating for decades came to a head, leading the federal courts to mandate that Louisiana institute a slew of prison reforms. While in this moment many paths were possible, the state eventually chose to go down the path of expanding the Louisiana carceral state to an unprecedented scale with a particular reliance on the state’s parish jails.⁸³ I argue that this choice was never inevitable and that tracking the material and ideological conditions that led to this move as well as the alternatives offered but not taken up, is critical to understanding how the disaster of OPP came to be as well as understanding the significance of strategies taken up by recent antiprison organizing in pursuit of a just reconstruction.

⁷⁹ ACLU National Prison Project, *Abandoned and Abused: Orleans Parish Prisoners in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina*, (ACLU, 2006), 10. The difference between a prison and jail is that prisons are places of long-term confinement for people who have been convicted of a ‘crime.’ On the other hand, jails are spaces that keep people locked up who are awaiting trial and at times are sentenced there for short sentences (a few months, not more than a year).

⁸⁰ Katy Reckdahl “Orleans Parish Prison Holds Almost as Many State Inmates as Local Prisoners,” *Times-Picayune*, December 19, 2010, http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2010/12/orleans_parity_prison_holds_al_1.html.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² By crisis, I am following the formulation of Ruth Wilson Gilmore (who follows Stuart Hall) who defines crisis as the moment in which the previous social relations can no longer be reproduced and must be reconfigured. How the crisis is resolved is never predetermined, although it may be overdetermined, and thus, multiple avenues are open for how the new social relations will be configured. For more on this see Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Crisis, Surplus and Opposition in Globalizing California*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

⁸³ Parishes in Louisiana are equivalent to counties in other states.

From Crisis to Consolidation

The history of the Louisiana penal system is marked through crises. For the majority of the twentieth century, such crises revolved around the state's singular prison, the Louisiana State Penitentiary, commonly referred to as Angola. Having long been known as the "bloodiest prison in the nation," the prison entered into an unmatched crisis of legitimacy in the 1970s. Conditions were wretched, and stabbings and escapes were monthly affairs.⁸⁴ Within this climate, scores of incarcerated people filed lawsuits against the penitentiary. In 1975, U.S. Magistrate Frank Polozola found in favor of four Black prisoners at Angola: Hayes Williams, Lee E. Stevenson, Arthur Mitchell Jr. and Lazarus D. Joseph, who had filed a lawsuit against Angola in 1971 for a number of constitutional issues including medical neglect, unsafe facilities, religious discrimination, racial segregation, and overcrowding. Polozola declared the penitentiary to be in a state of "extreme public emergency."⁸⁵ Massive changes were ordered in the name of restoring incarcerated people's constitutional rights.⁸⁶ For the next several years, the Louisiana penal system, including parish jails, was under the jurisdiction of federal court orders.

While many issues were brought to the forefront through this legal ruling, overcrowding became the central issue for the Department of Corrections (DOC) and the broader state bureaucracy. The federal courts ordered that Angola's prison population be reduced from over 4,000 prisoners to 2,641 prisoners within a few months' time.⁸⁷ In response, the DOC began looking for sites for new "satellite prisons" that Angola prisoners could be transferred to, and that potentially could replace Angola altogether. With time at a premium, the DOC scrambled to find and convert into new prisons a wide range of surplus state properties including schools, hospitals, and even a decommissioned navy ship.⁸⁸ There were few concerns about funding these conversions and meeting the other court mandates due to the availability of new federal Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) funds in addition to the exponential increase in Louisiana's oil revenue during the 1970s in response to the global jump in oil prices following OPEC's price hike. However, the DOC had extreme difficulty in attaining the support of local residents who routinely protested new prison plans.⁸⁹ Mobilized via fears of "dangerous criminals" that they believed would not only make their communities unsafe but would also lower their property values and tax revenues, communities from Caddo Parish to Bossier City to New Orleans East were successful in keeping out new satellite prisons.⁹⁰ At the same time, parish jails throughout Louisiana entered into their own states of emergency as they were forced to accommodate the hundreds of prisoners prohibited from being transferred to Angola, inciting anger in local sheriffs statewide.⁹¹ In response to these challenges, DOC

⁸⁴ "State Prison Inmate Slain in Stabbing," *State Times* (Baton Rouge, LA), July 18, 1974, 9-A.

⁸⁵ Gibbs Adams, "Federal Court Orders State Prison Changes," *The Advocate*, April 29, 1975. Judge West backed up Polozola in ordering sweeping changes. However, it is worth noting that Polozola had nothing to say about one of the plaintiff's main complaints: solitary confinement. "4 Inmates Ask Changes in Pen Safety Reform Plan," *State Times*, May 6, 1975.

⁸⁶ "Edwards Criticizes Angola Suggestions," *Morning Advocate*, April 30, 1975.

⁸⁷ *Louisiana Prison System Study*, 29, Governor's Office Long Range Prison Study Files, 1972-1980, Box 1, Louisiana State Archives.

⁸⁸ C.M. Hargroder, "7 Prison Sites Proposed," *The Times-Picayune*, September 16, 1975; "World War II Troopship May Be Used As Floating Louisiana Prison," *Monroe Morning World*, October 26, 1975.

⁸⁹ "Executive Budget 1974-1975, Vol. 1," Box 1: Executive Budget 1975-1980, State Budget Reports 1970-1989, Louisiana State Archives (LSA); "State of Louisiana Budget Fiscal Year 1974-1975," Box 3, State Budget Reports 1970-1989, LSA; "State of Louisiana Budget Fiscal Year 1975-1976," Box 3, State Budget Reports 1970-1989, LSA.

⁹⁰ Bonnie Davis, "Residents Will Protest Use of Carver School as Prison," *Shreveport Times*, July 24, 1975; Lynn Stewart, "State May Seize Site in Caddo for Prison," *Shreveport Times*, August 19, 1975; "Bossier Prison Site Reported Ruled Out," *Morning Advocate*, March 19, 1976; Richard Boyd, "Council Vows to Fight East N.O. Prison Facility" *States Item*, April 23, 1976; Patricia Gorman, "Homes Closed to Inmates" *States Item*, April 30, 1976.

⁹¹ Roy Reed, "Louisiana's Jails Are Being Packed," *New York Times*, September 18, 1975; Pierre V. DeGruy, "'State of Emergency' at Parish Jail—Foti," *The Times Picayune*, October 16, 1975.

Secretary Elayn Hunt and Angola Warden C. Paul Phelps, who had long been concerned with the rise of “lif-ers” at Angola, joined the call led by Angola’s incarcerated activists for a different solution to the overcrowding crisis: the early release of prisoners.⁹²

However, the New Orleans D.A. Harry Connick Sr. was adamantly against such proposals. At the time, Connick was in the process of building his career upon the racialized tough on crime politics sweeping the nation. He routinely attacked DOC officials in the press for advocating early release and alternatives to incarceration.⁹³ In fact, in the same months that the federal court orders were coming down, he successfully pushed for more punitive policies and practices through working with the NOPD to attain LEAA grants to expand policing powers.⁹⁴ In addition, Connick personally drafted dozens of draconian crime bills that instituted mandatory sentencing and reduced good time and parole eligibility, which the increasingly law and order state legislature was more than happy to pass.⁹⁵ With arrest rates going up,⁹⁶ sentencing becoming harsher and the number of people being paroled steadily dropping, overcrowding pressure intensified across the state.⁹⁷ Thus, Louisiana was confronted with a range of different pushes and pulls, from federal court rulings, to parish level politics, to active disagreement among state and city officials, to global political economic realignments and new federal monies, as state leaders attempted to figure out the future direction of the penal system.

By the decade’s end, it was clear that Louisiana’s politicians were attempting to build their way out of the overcrowding crisis. Three new prisons had been built with more on the way, while thousands of new beds were added to Angola, more than doubling the state’s prison population from 3,550 people in 1975 to 8,661 people in 1980.⁹⁸ This unprecedented carceral state building project was emboldened and buttressed by the 1980 election of David Treen as governor. He had explicitly campaigned on a tough on crime platform. At the same time, Polozola, now a federal judge, began to mandate that Louisiana deal with its continual overcrowding crisis through expanding the prison system.⁹⁹ Yet, as incarcerated activists with *The Angolite* and the Lifers Association as well as free world prison reformers argued at the time, growing the state’s carceral apparatus did not solve the crisis, but instead propelled further overcrowding.¹⁰⁰ The ongoing overcrowding at the prisons further increased pressure on dozens of parish jails as they were relied on, yet again, to house thousands of state

⁹² “Two Year Time Limit Termed Impossible for Angola Changes,” *State Times*, June 17, 1975; Tommy Mason, “Lifer’s,” *The Angolite*, August 1975, 23; John McCormick, “Legal Action: Our Goodtime Law May Be Changed,” *The Angolite*, September 1975, 1–2.

⁹³ Associated Press, “Inmate Release Policy Blasted,” *Morning Advocate*, June 9, 1975; Ed Anderson, “Connick Attacks Parole Board Plan,” *The Times-Picayune*, October 28, 1975.

⁹⁴ “‘Career Criminal’ Bureau for N.O.,” *The Times-Picayune*, March 19, 1975.

⁹⁵ Jack Wardlaw, “Connick Wins Anti-‘Good Time’ Battle in House,” *State Item*, July 2, 1975, 12-a; Pierre V. DeGruy, “Connick Endeavors in Legislature Pay Off: Entire Package is Passed” *The Times-Picayune*, July 31, 1975.

⁹⁶ “Jail Overload Credited to Police Work,” *The Times-Picayune*, April 17, 1980.

⁹⁷ “Criminals Face Harsher Penalties as New Law Takes Effect,” *State Item*, September 17, 1975.

⁹⁸ *Louisiana Prison System Study*, 4, Governor’s Office Long Range Prison Study Files, 1972-1980, Box 1, LSA; Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement, “The Data: Prison Crowding in Louisiana, 1988,” Folder 9: Prison Reform Reports, Remarks, Statements 1987-1988, Box 3, Rev. James Stovall Papers, Louisiana State University.

⁹⁹ “Treen: ‘Going to Be Tough to Get a Pardon from Me,’” *Alexandria Daily Town Talk*, March 9, 1980; Gibbs Adams, “State Prisons Must Expand,” *Morning Advocate*, May 19, 1983.

¹⁰⁰ “Remarks by Jack D. Foster, Project Director Law and Justice Section, The Council of State Governments Before The Governor’s Pardon, Parole, and Rehabilitation Commission,” May 9, 1977, Folder 2: Governors Pardon, Parole, and Rehabilitation Commission Remarks and Reports, Box 3, Rev. James Stovall Papers, Louisiana State University; “The Crowded Cage,” *The Angolite*, November/December 1983, 35–60.

prisoners, leading to overflowing jails from New Orleans to Lafayette.¹⁰¹ In the case of New Orleans, the situation became so dire that in the summer of 1983 then Sheriff Foti erected a tent jail to expand the capacity of OPP.¹⁰²

While sheriffs everywhere were frustrated by this situation, their response to overcrowding was markedly different in the early 1980s than it had been in the mid-1970s. When parish jails had filled to capacity in response to the 1975 court orders, sheriffs lobbied to get state prisoners out of their jails.¹⁰³ But only a few years later, while sheriffs collectively petitioned the state to get so-called “violent offenders” out of their jails, they *also* pushed for funds to renovate and expand the parish jails to make space for both people awaiting trial as well as state prisoners.¹⁰⁴ We can understand this shift from a number of vantage points. While in 1975 the overcrowding crisis appeared to be temporary, by the early 1980s there was no sign of incarceration rates letting up, as Governor Treen and the state legislature continued to press for the passage of punitive crime bills. In addition, when parish officials had been compelled to release people to stay within the population limits set by Judge Polozola, the media attacked them for letting “criminals” loose into the streets.¹⁰⁵ With both politicians and the media employing such fear-mongering tactics, political will was on the side of jail expansion versus early release or alternatives to incarceration as a solution to the overcrowding. In fact, Governor Treen’s decision to prioritize jail construction over education, healthcare, and levees in the state budget was “not out of a desire to make life easier for these convicts but to make sure that no judge feels compelled to release somebody back into society who should not be there just because prisons are overcrowded.”¹⁰⁶ And indeed, as the Louisiana Coalition on Jails and Prisons would highlight in their decarceration campaigns throughout the 1980s, the atrocious conditions within jails persisted alongside their shiny new renovations.¹⁰⁷

Sheriffs’ desires to build up their parish jails aligned not only with the dominant revanchist politics of racial neoliberal governance, but also with the economic conditions confronting the state. When sheriffs were first required to take in state prisoners in 1975, it was a financial burden since the DOC was paying sheriff departments a per diem rate of only \$4.50 a day per prisoner.¹⁰⁸ But as the overcrowding crisis wore on, local parish officials, including sheriffs, successfully petitioned the state to increase the per diem to \$18.25 by 1980.¹⁰⁹ The higher per diem rate made sheriffs much more amenable to housing state prisoners as they were able to use the

¹⁰¹ “Orleans Prison Above Inmate Ceiling for 3 Months,” *State Times*, May 17, 1983; Nanette Russell, “District Attorney Angry State Prisoners in Jails,” *Lafayette Advertiser*, June 28, 1983.

¹⁰² “Foti Gets OK to Put Inmates in Tents,” *The Times-Picayune*, June 14, 1983.

¹⁰³ Pierre V. Degruy, “Packed Prison Feared,” *The Times Picayune*, September 12, 1975.

¹⁰⁴ Memo from Carey J. Roussel to Donald G. Bollinger, March 17, 1981, Folder 1: Public Safety 1981, Box 815: P 1981, David Treen Papers, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University; “Sheriff Layrisson Angry Over Jail Fund Postponement,” *Vindicator*, May 25, 1983.

¹⁰⁵ Monte Williams, “Crowded Jails Let Criminals Free,” *Daily Iberian*, June 12, 1983.

¹⁰⁶ “Comments on Governor David C. Treen’s Criminal Justice Package for Possible Use by President Reagan in his September 28 Speech to the International Association of Chiefs of Police,” Folder 4: Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice 1981, Box 796: L 1981, David Treen Papers, Tulane University.

¹⁰⁷ Louisiana Coalition on Jails & Prisons, “Jail Project Update” pamphlet, 1981, Folder: Louisiana Coalition, Box 2, Southern Coalition on Jails and Prisons Records, 1974-1980, The Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Louisiana Coalition on Jails & Prisons, “Louisiana Jails” pamphlet, n.d., Folder: Louisiana Coalition, Box 2, Southern Coalition on Jails and Prisons Records, 1974-1980, The Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁰⁸ “Legislative Digest,” *The Angolite*, September/October 1978, 9.

¹⁰⁹ Memo from C. Paul Phelps to William A. Nungesser, October 3, 1980, Folder 8: Corrections 1980, Box 666: C 1980, David Treen Papers, Tulane University.

funds to build out their departments' carceral infrastructure. What's more is this per diem system met the financial needs of the broader state as well. Since the Jim Crow regime, the state had been loath to finance the penal system.¹¹⁰ To meet the 1975 federal court orders, the state was required to increase funding to the Department of Corrections on an unmatched scale. The DOC budget during this time shot up from \$20 million in 1974 to \$135 million by 1982 with tens of millions of dollars spent on new prison construction which, as previously mentioned, was easily funded for the first several years through unexpected oil revenues.¹¹¹ Yet oil dependent economies are notoriously precarious and Louisiana entered into economic crisis in the early 1980s as oil prices began to fall.¹¹² While Louisiana at this time switched to financing prison construction primarily through bonds, such debt financing schemes could not be utilized to fund the DOC's operating budget. Thus, expanding jails to house state prisoners was a more financially viable option, given that even with its increase, the per diem system rate is significantly below the cost of keeping someone locked up in Angola, St. Gabriel, Dixon, or any of the other state penitentiaries.

What had started out as a temporary spatial fix had become the long-term geographic solution to prison overcrowding. By the 1990s, when Louisiana gained the title of having the highest incarceration rate in the nation, almost half of the state's prisoners were behind bars in parish jails with Orleans Parish Prison as the largest jail in the state.¹¹³ When the levees broke on the morning of August 29, 2005, this arrangement had become so normalized that parish jails were routinely referred to as a local prisons.

Conclusion

The brutal and violent conditions that the individuals who happened to be locked up in OPP found themselves in the hours, days, weeks and months following the storm was not an instance of the criminal justice system failing, but the logical result of the accumulated decisions made by a racial capitalist state in crisis. These incarcerated individuals (state prisoners as well as those who just happened to be picked up by the NOPD on the 28th) were transferred here and there across the state into far-flung state prisons and parish jails while people arrested in the storm's aftermath were locked up in the Greyhound bus station that had been converted into a temporary jail and run by then Angola Warden Burl Cain.

Almost five years after the flood, the city was granted \$270 million in FEMA recovery funds to rebuild the OPP jail complex that had been flooded during the storm. Because of the damages to the complex, OPP had already shrunk in size by several thousand beds from its pre-storm capacity. In response to the new monies, New Orleans Sheriff Marlin Gusman proposed using the FEMA funds to not just rebuild but to *expand* OPP closer to its previous size.¹¹⁴ In response, community activists re-formed OPPRC to push for an even smaller city jail with a bed cap of 1,438 beds. Throughout their campaign, OPPRC organizers leveraged the national media by highlighting the inhuman abandonment of prisoners before, during and after the storm while also revealing the multiscale state and capital relations embedded in the per diem system and the housing of state

¹¹⁰ Mark T. Carleton, *Politics and Punishment; the History of the Louisiana State Penal System* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1971).

¹¹¹ "Executive Budget 1974-1975, Vol. 1," 9, Box 1, State Budget Reports 1970-1989, Louisiana State Archives; "Louisiana State Budget 1982-1983," 39, Box 4, State Budget Reports 1970-1989, Louisiana State Archives;

¹¹² "Executive Budget Program 1982-1983 Vol 1," A11, Box 2: Executive Budgets 1980-1985, Louisiana State Archives. For more on the precarity of oil economies at this time see Petteer Nore and Terisa Turner, *Oil and Class Struggle* (London: Zed Press, 1980).

¹¹³ Christopher A. Keaton, *Adult Correctional Systems*, report (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Legislative Fiscal Office, 2000), 7.

¹¹⁴ Carl Takei, "The \$270 Million Lockup: Will New Orleans' Sheriff Stand in the Way of Rebuilding a Smaller and Smarter Orleans Parish Prison?," American Civil Liberties Union, February 4, 2011, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/270-million-lockup-will-new-orleans-sheriff-stand-way-rebuilding-smaller-and-smarter-orleans>.

prisoners within the jail. Through several months of strategic and disciplined organizing, OPPRC won the bed cap. This organizing campaign was successful in both limiting the number of inmates locked up within New Orleans as well as making a small, but still important dent, in the overall prison population of Louisiana as a whole.

This is not to say that the fight is over. Sheriff Gusman continues to push for a larger jail, currently known as “Phase Three” that would house prisoners with mental illness, a particularly sticky issue in its own right given that the city still is without anywhere near adequate mental health care since the closure of Charity Hospital. During the fall of 2015, Gusman filed a motion in Federal Court to force the city to allow him to build “Phase Three.”¹¹⁵ Luckily, the courts rejected this claim, but his exuberance for jail expansion has not receded. The need to be vigilant is ever-present as history shows us how quickly a few beds here and there can turn into thousands. Today, grassroots organizations like OPPRC and others such as Voice of the Ex-Offender (VOTE), Family and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children (FFLIC), and BreakOUT are creating crucial spaces to mobilize people around locking fewer and fewer people up and to foster expansive thinking about what a world free of containment and confinement could be. It is this type of organizing work we should be looking to as we strive to materialize a future grounded in abolition democracy and collective freedom.

¹¹⁵ “Judge Asked to Force City to Build Housing for Mentally Ill Inmates,” *Louisiana Weekly*, September 29, 2015, <http://www.louisianaweekly.com/judge-asked-to-force-city-to-build-housing-for-mentally-ill-inmates/>.

THE SITUATION - PART 1

WRITING FROM THE INSIDE OF LOUISIANA'S PRISONS

INTRODUCTION

FROM INSIDE BY JUDY DEMAREST

It was my “dream come true!” I would call the class Social Concerns, an actual service learning experience for high school students in the classroom setting. I had started Interact Clubs at the three New Orleans high schools where I had taught. The first was at Warren Easton, where I had spent over twenty years as the club sponsor, involving teens in their community. Then there was O. Perry Walker, during that first year after Katrina. And now my club at Sci High would be a class. As I had been doing through Interact Club, I would be teaching kids...not the test!

My plan for the course was that we would explore societal issues; education would be through real life experiences. I would bring those experiences into the classroom and the students outside to the real world. We would talk about and witness, firsthand, homelessness, hunger, and a host of other conditions in our community. Students would volunteer with programs striving to ease these situations, while examining the issues and brainstorming solutions. They would be empowered as they volunteered, and their voices could be heard.

The semester had not yet begun, when Mosi Makori, a staff member of Students at the Center and an investigator for the Innocence Project, asked me to read a trial transcript. It was then, on that July Saturday morning, that incarceration entered the social concerns script. False conviction and imprisonment would take center stage, with Jerome Morgan as the main character...Jerome Morgan, the teenager, the same age as many of my students, and Jerome Morgan, the man, who had spent more than half of his life in Angola for a crime he did not commit.

Jerome became an integral part of my life and the lives of those students. At first, it was through the trial transcript, which we read together in class. Then we read his essay, “From the River to the Lake.” The students began exchanging letters with him. Then there were telephone calls, my visits to Angola, and a class tour of the prison. Jerome became a student in the class, when I invited him to write about topics we were exploring. He turned in essays on the American family in crisis, hunger, and homelessness, offering his unique perspective from inside the prison he called home.

Through the social concerns class, Angola came into the students’ lives and consciousness. Likewise, men who lived inside those prison walls and cages became a part of our story, when Jerome shared his writings, student essays and letters, and my own essays and letters with them. He invited these men into our discussions. They wrote about their own experiences inside, how they came to be there, as well as their thoughts on the topics being discussed in our class.

In this section of *Go to Jail*, some of Jerome’s essays, pieces written by his friends at Angola, student writings, and my own have been collected along with pieces by students in Students at the Center classes at McMain and McDonogh 35 High Schools. Together they provide a glimpse into Angola...from the inside!

CHAPTER ONE: ANGOLA IN THE FIRST PERSON

ANOTHER MAN-MADE DISASTER

BY JUDY DEMAREST

One night during the fall of 2008, I attended a fundraiser for the Innocence Project of New Orleans (IPNO). I was a high school English teacher at the time, and an avid fan of John Grisham. The opportunity to hear the famous writer speak and perhaps shake his hand was a temptation I could not resist. The meal was mediocre, typical banquet food. Grisham, however, met all of my expectations. He was phenomenal! The introduction to IPNO, however, changed my life.

I grew up in a middle-class white family in New Orleans, as a patriotic American who believed in our system of government. I had been taught that if you do the right thing and work hard, you will be a success. I believed that being a teacher was my vocation, and that it was honorable, though not profitable, work, and that teachers would always be necessary to society. I believed that if you were accused of something you did not do, justice would prevail, and your innocence would be proven. I had learned in history class that the first three buildings in any new community were generally a school, a church, and a prison. These were the foundations of democracy. We had freedom of religion, a right to public education, and the right to justice.

Although I had experienced having a student arrested for murder during a high school English class I was teaching... twice..., and a few other encounters with the law, such as traffic tickets, those experiences were never really about ME! Even when my younger brother did 30 days in a rural Alabama jail for having long hair, looking weird, and being a stranger in the small rural town, that didn't affect me much. After all, he did look weird with that long hair, and my dad left him there to teach him a lesson. On the slick, Daddy had the minister of a church checking on him daily to be sure he was safe!

So, at the IPNO fundraiser, when men took the stage to tell their stories of false incarceration, decades in prison, some on death row, for crimes they did not commit, they touched my heart in a way that nothing else ever had. Then, a few weeks later, one of those things that happens in small town New Orleans occurred. I agreed to have Students at the Center come in to work with my honors American literature class, and the staff member who came to my class was Brandon Early, an investigator for IPNO. New Orleans is absolutely a small town!

At our first SAC class meeting, Brandon (now known as Mosi Makori) had the students sit in a circle. They had been given an assignment to write an essay that could be submitted with their college applications. Using the SAC process, students volunteered to read their essays aloud and then call on two persons in the circle to comment. There was a feeling of hesitation in the class, since they had not participated in an activity like this previously. During one silence, I decided to share a very personal experience from my own life. I hoped to encourage them to open up, and my story was more successful than I had expected. Learning that I had been a victim of violence, the students began to view me as a human being, not only as their teacher.

During subsequent classes, we read selections from *Men We Love, Men We Hate*, a book of student writings published by SAC. Members of the class were inspired by these essays and shared stories of their relationships with their own fathers, one of whom happened to be a client of IPNO. The students became eager to write and looked forward to the possibility that their work would be published also.

As part of that semester and others to follow, Brandon brought in exonerees to speak to my students. Each and every one of them told a story that captured my heart and the hearts of my students. I remember that the first man who came to speak to my class was John Thompson. I'll never forget the part of his story when his son's

teacher read the article about his impending execution to the class. She didn't know that John Jr. was sitting in the classroom. I felt terrible for his son, but I identified with the teacher. How awful to make such a mistake and hurt a student so deeply! I would have been mortified. But the teacher was not the only person I identified with. This man had lost eighteen years of his life, and there was absolutely no way that he would ever get them back. How could that happen in our democracy? Why didn't justice prevail? Oh, yes, eventually it did, but that wasn't good enough. No amount of money in a lawsuit would give J.T. back his life. Disillusionment began to creep in.

At the end of that school year, I was told that my contract would not be renewed for the following school year. I was told that my experience, dedication, devotion, loyalty, and 36 years in that school did not outweigh my liability. They could get 2.5 teachers for the price of me. I was crushed. I had devoted more than half of my life to that school and to its students. They were my family! I had believed that if I did the right thing, and if I advocated for my students and helped them to develop into productive citizens and life-long learners, that I would always have a teaching position, as long as I was healthy enough and willing to continue working. Disillusionment was picking up speed, especially when they began hiring young teachers, directly out of college, who were not only not certified, but often teaching out of their areas of expertise.

I taught at a different charter school the following year, and SAC continued to be a part of my curriculum. When I learned that J.T. had put together a presentation called "Voices of Innocence," I invited him to bring his group to perform for all of the juniors in the school. That was the day I first met Doug Dilosa. Until then, every exoneree I had met had admitted to being involved in petty crimes, but not guilty of the capital crime for which he had been convicted. (I would later meet many exonerees who were not guilty of any crimes whatsoever.) So far, they had all been African Americans and victims not only of the system but of poverty as well. Now, I am kind of famous for not seeing color in people. I've made some pretty funny mistakes in my time. But Doug was not only white, he was an educated professional, a successful businessman, who traveled all over the world in his work, and was financially quite secure. He and his wife had two children, and they owned two homes. His financial status was certainly much higher than mine. This man was definitely not from a poor neighborhood.

Doug told us the story of how he spent years in Angola, convicted of murdering his own wife. As he told the story, I was shocked to hear that he had been beaten and tied up and left unconscious on his living room floor by the same person or persons who murdered his wife. But that wasn't enough to prove his innocence, when a police detective became angry at him for complaining publicly that there was no progress on the murder investigation. He was falsely convicted of the murder of his own wife, and their children were left to grow up without both parents. He was sent to Angola to spend his life there. Then when he found the evidence to prove his innocence, while working in the prison law library, it still took over seven years for him to be released. How could this possibly happen in the American criminal justice system? Were there actually people who were fabricating and/or hiding evidence to convict innocent persons, in order to further their own careers or to get revenge?

My disillusionment has now taken over. It ultimately came rushing in as fast as the waters from the levee breaches after Katrina. This is also a man-made disaster. No longer can I trust that right will triumph over wrong. This type of travesty can happen to anyone! It could be you or me or someone we love. There are no requirements to qualify for injustice. Anyone can be the victim of false conviction.

Since I met Doug Dilosa for the first time, I have met a host of other men who have been wrongfully convicted, as well as some who have served their time and been released, and others, some claiming innocence and some admitting guilt, who are currently incarcerated. Some of them have shared their writings about their experiences in prison, and they are collected here in the pages that follow. They have enlightened me about the "lives" they have as slave laborers in the fields, and inside of the walls, cells, and cages that are Angola.

A LIFE SENTENCE IN ANGOLA

BY JEROME MORGAN

Angola Prison, 2012

Other than a person being unmercifully pulverized to death physically, being incarcerated at Angola should be considered some of the most savagely schemed and psychologically sinister practices of punishment ever known to mankind! Here, inside the nation's largest maximum-security prison, over 5,000 human beings are seized under some of the most dehumanizing, debilitating, demoralizing, and humiliating conditions ever guised as the interests of retribution, public safety, and political profit. Therefore, for the sake of all the various public prudence involved in such a slave-dollar system, I would like to reflect upon this issue with the intended conscientiousness of imprisonment, as opposed to the nitty-gritty of my 18-year experience in such a state of confinement.

Louisiana State Penitentiary? The term, "penitentiary," actually derives from the word "penitent," which is an adjective that is defined as "sorry for having done wrong and willing to atone," i.e., a penitent person. Contrite! Penance! I believe most people would more than likely agree that being expelled from society is surely enough to urge any human being to want to do better and to be a better person, given that this concept of expulsion is rooted in the values of redemption and rehabilitation, since humans are by nature social beings.

Nevertheless, the routine operations that take place within the confines of Angola seem to come directly in contrast with the fundamental principles of humanity. At Camp D dormitory units, the day-to-day living is totally horrendous! Dorms are crowded beyond the designed capacity of 64 men with 95 prisoners per dorm, in a 4-dormitory unit, and stacked in each dorm in three rows of double bunks, too uncomfortable to be considered beds. The guy assigned to the top bunk has no living space at all to himself, and the guy assigned to the bottom bunk has the space in between the double bunks to utilize as an aisle to his own personal space. This sleeping area takes up about 85% of the dormitory.

The bathroom area is about 5% of the whole dorm and consists of one urinal, 5 toilets, 7 sinks, and 6 shower stalls in an area so small that when one uses any of these fixtures, you could just simply extend your arms and touch the person next to you.

There are two separate TV room areas. One is designated for non-sports programs and the other is strictly for sports viewers. The sports TV room was originally the game room area before the 64-man capacity was increased. This area consists of 3 picnic style wooden tables and benches for purposes of playing board games, card games, doing casework, or writing personal letters. Now, these activities share a space with adamant sports viewers. The non-sports TV room consists of 4 long wooden benches, and viewers of either TV room are not allowed to use blankets or pillows to cushion the benches.

At breakfast time, prisoners housed in Camp D are expected to be up and ready when chow is called, usually at 6AM. If the prisoner is not ready, he could very easily miss out on breakfast, because the door will be locked 5 minutes after breakfast is called. The door won't be opened again until breakfast is over, and the other guys are being let back into the dorm. 30-45 minutes later, work call will be signaled by obnoxious whistles and authoritative orders to exit the dorm. Once everyone is hurried out of the dorms, the prisoners are then expected to be "deuced-up" along the gravel path leading to the field line check-out gate under the sounds of more whistles and strict orders to straighten up the double line. Once the field line roster is being called, there is to be no talking. Once outside the check-out gate, the prisoners are expected to pair up again and to be counted and marched to work. Once allowed back in the dorm, the prisoners are again counted. Once the count is confirmed, it's pure pandemonium, as 95 guys rush to the bathroom area to use the restroom and get cleaned up

before chow is called. Remember, the prisoner has to be ready or he'll miss out on being fed. This same pandemonium occurs again once everyone returns from chow and tries to get situated before the second half of work is called at 5 minutes before noon.

At 4:00PM, the field lines are brought in for the day. The last meal is served, and mostly everyone rushes to take a shower, relax, and attend to personal matters. At this time, non-legal collect calls to family and friends are permitted. However, there are only 3 phones per dorm. Most of the time guys are too beat down from work and all the hassles throughout the day, their minds and bodies are too worn out to suffer another minute. Sleep is desperately needed to prepare to withstand the exact same demands tomorrow and every weekday. Any action, or lack thereof, that can be taken as offense by security could afford you to be written up for defiance or aggravated disobedience, thrown in the dungeon, sprayed with pepper spray, and sent to Camp J.

At Camp J, a disciplinary/management area, a person is subject to being inside of a 6x9 cell for 23 hours and 45 minutes each day, and restrained with handcuffs, waist chains, and shackles each and every time he is removed from that cell, including when he is allowed the remaining 15 minutes of the day to take a shower. The shower is installed inside of another cell. It is also required that the Camp J prisoner wear these restraints during all visitation, although the visits are already restricted as non-contact inside of a small room with a dizzying screen as a partition between the prisoner and his visitor. One should be able to imagine the deep sense of humiliation that imposes on both the prisoner and his visitor.

For an hour of recreation, three times per week, the Camp J prisoner is removed from the cell and placed in a yard pen, which is 7 feet wide, 18 feet long, and 7 feet high, enclosed by wire on all sides, including the ceiling of the pen. No drinking water is made available during this period of recreation. He is not allowed to have any food items in his cell and is only offered meals served in small portions at 7AM, noon, and 4PM daily. There is no radio, no television, no air-conditioning, and only two wall fans at each end of the 14-cell tier. Many human beings placed under these conditions find the isolation and solitude psychologically excruciating, and often resort to meaningless arguments, foolish altercations, and intense screaming in their attempts to silence the constant threats of loneliness and boredom.

Some people may be inclined to believe that being subjected to such a state of existence should motivate a prisoner to overcome these disruptive conditions. I would ask, "Where could this begin?" These conditions are so deplorable; they actually invoke the harsh mentality of mistreatment. Stripping a person of his genuine sense of being, deceiving his self-identity, and devaluing his innate self-worth appear to be the goals of the system. Why can't there be a way to implement interaction that is encouraging towards a healthier social and psychological stability?

In years past, I was required to work in the fields in some of the most unbearable weather of both extremes, planting and picking vegetables, cutting very thick areas of grass with dull tools, digging ditches deep enough to bury myself in, lined up two by two with heavy tools propped on our shoulders, walking for miles at a time, to and from the various worksites, in rubber boots, for 8 hours a day and 4 cents an hour pay. If one of us steps anywhere out of line, he might hear a gun shot that would be sufficient cause to have him placed in Camp J! This configuration also seems to defeat the whole idea of punishment being functional in a way that cultivates a prisoner to become fit for society. Instead, the plantation antics are fueled by nothing but old-fashioned slavery tactics, as the horseback-riding, gun-toting prison guards amuse themselves 5 days a week by hassling newcomers and competing with the other "line-pushers" to see which field line can do the most work. Oftentimes, I have caught a good glimpse into the eyes of one of the trustees, whose job assignment it is to keep a constant supply of crates and vegetable sacks available to the field line, as they load all of the picked vegetables onto the donkey-pulled wagon that the trustee is steering. I see that his very soul seems to be vacant, his heart

debilitated, and overall demeanor totally unfeeling! But what else could be expected once a person conforms to not being treated as a human being?

Eighteen years of being a prisoner in Angola, an inmate, a slave, a convict, an offender, a prison number, a burden, a field hand, a nobody, has cost my family and friends a near fortune to provide me any semblance of concern, which would remind me that I am still very much a person, worthy of love and affection. The phone rates are outrageous, visits are extremely time-consuming and costly, correspondence through the mail is outdated, and the four cents an hour wage which I earn is never nearly enough to afford hygiene necessities, writing materials, supplements for the half-cooked small servings of prison meals provided three times a day, let alone be of any financial assistance to my family or friends in society.

PRISON? It is defined as “any place or condition of confinement or forcible restraint, seizure.” The word is contracted from the Latin term *prehendere*. So is the word “prehensile,” which means “adapted for seizing or holding, especially by wrapping around an object.” Hmm? Object, seizure, forcible restraint, condition of confinement! DEHUMANIZE? 1. To deprive of human qualities or attributes 2. To render mechanical and routine.

REHABILITATE? 1. To restore to useful life through education and therapy 2. To reinstate the good name of 3. To restore the former rank, privileges, or rights of 4. To bring or restore to a state of health, constructive activity, etc.

Being constrained by the daily devious methods of Angola is demoralizing at best, and is entirely a melee against the merits of remorse, forgiveness, and atonement. Simply because the essence of rehabilitation has been defied! The system has mostly succumbed to operating as if the person can never be free from guilt, and revenge becomes central. In Louisiana, over 4500 prisoners are sentenced to life without parole. These individuals are deemed unredeemable for their past mistakes and unworthy of being treated as human, causing an internal conflict between being dehumanized and meaninglessly rehabilitated!

After all, what point is there in rehabilitating a person who will never again have the opportunity to be a productive, contributing member of society?

DEHUMANIZATION BY EZRA RICHARDSON

Angola, 2012

Being incarcerated entails a great amount of torture, frustration, and emotional turmoil. For someone who has lived in an American suburb, this is a state of existence to which he could never become attuned.

Being a product of a tax paying society, I was kidnapped and wrongfully convicted. Taking up permanent residence within the Louisiana State Prison, I've been forced to exist according to subservient economic standards. Having my name and social security number replaced with a six-digit number and bar code, I'm forced to live as a machine.

Transported 4 ½ hours away from the city where I was born and raised, and shepherded miles into the infamous Mississippi River basin, my clothes have been taken and substituted with state issue rubber boots, denim jeans, a bundle of dingy tee shirts, and some boxers that are too big. I am escorted into a building where all my head and facial hair is shaved, and the institution labels me an inmate.

Opening my mind to what is transpiring, my initial instinct is to arm myself, both mentally and physically. On the surface it would appear I am a warrior; however, within the contours of my mind, I am scared to death.

After going through the introductory classification, the doctor conducts what he calls a physical and determines I have a clean bill of health, thus stipulating I can do all sorts of strenuous work. He did not note that I suffer from emphysema, my right knee has been surgically repaired, my vision is terrible, and I have a history of seizures.

Undergoing this procedure, it becomes obvious this system expects to make a machine of everyone who enters the Department of Corrections. In a world where most labor forces are being replaced by state-of-the-art computers and digital chips, the system operates within a \$63,000,000 fiscal budget. Having enough capital to employ the most recent industrial machines, this money is instead evidently stashed away in private expense accounts.

In place of modern technology, men are handed primitive tools and forced to line up in twos. Angola exists on 18,000 acres of underdeveloped farmland. This is the same land 5,100 men are ordered to cultivate with hand-held garden tools. Fearing these men, which the system labels “inmates,” will try to escape, guards are given shotguns and horses, and told to shoot on sight in the event someone decides not to labor at a sufficient pace.

Existing within the Louisiana Department of Corrections, men are dehumanized. Men are ordered, under the dictates of weaponry, to act as machines. To live is to survive the ill and insane conditions the system exists under.

Today, Louisiana leads the nation in overall incarceration and Angola leads the world in modern-day slavery. People in society need to open their eyes and really think about what is going on right in their own backyards. They never know; their relative just may become a slave!

TEARS VINDICATE MY SORROW BY TERRANCE WINN #296659

Angola, 2009

Mom's a diabetic, who's also a patient of dialysis. The hurt I carry for her health causes me to question malice. It's a huge challenge not to go off the deep end, knowing her life depends on a machine. At times I be needing a shoulder to lean on. And it amazes me how my l'il brother stays strong. In the eye of this hurricane, very seldom does he reveal the train of his suffering, working two jobs just so he won't have to be hustling. Still he's struggling because his body has inherited aches. Lord, how much more must I take? My whole world shakes because my Mom's oldest sister lost two toes. Almost daily her leg is swollen, causing the doctor to wanna take some more. And the next oldest aunt needs a back operation, but refuses the anesthetic temptation. There is no army of salvation, this is far too savage of a nation, that caused my youngest aunt to have a stroke and get her shoulder repaired. My uncle died of lung cancer, never having smoked, yet it's all fair. Now my aunt in Cali is going through menopause, those hot flashes are a mental clause for a righteous cause. Furthermore, I apologize to Shateria and Shamirique, my absence entices you two to vulnerably reach out to wolves who pose as sheep. Regardless, you both know my love is in bounds and leaps. Shama, when you lost your grandfather, I felt so helpless that I wasn't there to kiss and wipe your cheeks, and losing Judy still hurts me deep. After all these years, I'm wondering where are my Peeps. Got me fighting not to beg or borrow, tears vindicate my sorrow.

Tears vindicate my sorrow is the truth. It's my tears for the things not seen. Many thugs, gangstas, live the life in the moment, never giving thought to their families. Prison is difficult; beyond the badge of toughness, you live through a lot of rough times. To see your Moms struggling to come visit you, knowing she's sick says a lot. 9 times out of 10, Moms is going to ride for you when no one else will. Yet, while we're living the life, none of this ever comes to mind. It only takes one second to live your life via memories.

Daily I hurt due to each line in this poem. Having a younger brother who looks up to you and missing out on everything meaningful and brotherly in his life hurts. Having two daughters who both love you, yet you're not being there to witness one take her first steps or utter her first words is painful. Missing their school days, sick days, the days they need your protection, the pain can be unbearable if you love your kids. Hearing them ask, "Daddy when are you coming home? I need you," is enough to drive you insane.

Then living through other close family members' sudden illnesses and having to be kept in the blind about it because they don't want to add to your hurt. It's way more to being a thug than this type of suffering.

You come to prison, but to find your perfect match while in prison is beautiful. Then to lose her.... A person begins questioning everything, like, why me? What did I do so bad to deserve all of this? It all deals with love and loss. This really sums up tears vindicating my sorrow. You begin to think of yourself as the evil on all these great people whom you love unconditionally, and it makes you want to shut down emotionally. It's a true testimony of what you go through away from your loved ones. And it's hell for a hustla also, because life doesn't stop for no one. Give thought to those that love you and have your best interest at heart.

FATHER AND SON

BY JEROME MORGAN

Angola, 2011

On Tuesday, October 4th, 1994, I was blessed to be born a son. The young lady who had given birth to him was only a few weeks into her second trimester when I'd been arrested on April 21, 1994 (8 days after my 18th birthday). I was "just in" the beginning phase of a life term to which I had been sentenced on September 14, 1994, a week after being wrongfully convicted of a murder I did not commit. As a result, this caused Justin's birth to be much less of a joyous occasion to his mother and me, to say the least. I was an 18-year-old now plagued with the trauma of being behind bars in a distant place. I had not the slightest idea of the degree of suffering now gripping my being. She was a 19-year-old, newly burdened with the challenges of raising our son on her own without a clue of the selfless sacrifices that would be demanded of her heart.

In the midst of all of the conflicting circumstances of my absence, the relationship between me and Justin's mom failed quite miserably! It seemed that the situation of my being in prison without any certainty of when—if ever—I'd be free again was viewed by her as a devastating and embarrassing disappointment given the kind of upbringing she desired for our child. And I had no way of assuring her that my predicament would somehow be rectified soon....

Quite naturally, due to my incarceration, our communication was very limited. Consequently, in a short span of time, this limited communication dwindled into us being out of touch for years at a time, as she'd moved on with the hopes of affording a normal life for her and our son.

As for me, I was left to deal with the anguish of my captivity without any door of opportunity to fulfill my obligations and capacity as Justin's father. I, too, was well acquainted with the voids I had to endure while growing up without knowing my father, and words cannot explain how much I didn't want that for my own son.

In such a spirit, I took pride in continuing my efforts to have a presence in his life as much as I could, despite my many frustrations and the troubles I'd encountered as I struggled against the conformity of life inside Angola.

Until one day, in the fall of 2004, I was presented with the possibility of meeting my son for the very first time. The occasion was a first of its kind – an outdoor annual event catered to incarcerated fathers, providing them with quality time with their children in an attempt to reduce the rate of failure affecting children with incarcerated parents. I couldn't be sure if Justin's mother would give her consent being as though she'd always been against me mentioning anything about my situation to Justin because she didn't want to answer all the questions he was bound to ask. Albeit, I took a shot and submitted all the required information to the coordinator of the event with hopes that Justin's mom would grant her permission. I'd also submitted information on my two nephews (Jerome, now 18 and Ja'Mel, now 16) and figured that if Justin wasn't allowed to come, I would just share that time with them.

However, much to my surprise and delight, it was Justin who showed up and not my nephews! It's far beyond my ability to describe the exhilaration I felt at that very moment. As I laid eyes on this handsome young fella' for the very first time, we hugged and we kissed, we conversed and laughed! He was 9 years old making 10 and I was 28.

We talked in depth about his likes and dislikes, family, my situation, and the future as if our bond as father and son had never been severed. It was such a wonderful feeling being with him, but at the same time I can starkly recall this nagging pain wrenching at my heart because I was well aware that this much awaited day would soon come to an end, and I could tell that Justin felt it too.

Well, I guess you could say that my son and I survived the torment of having to go our separate ways. In the weeks and months that followed, when I would speak with Justin and his mom over the phone, all Justin would talk about was what we would do next year when he would attend the event. Unfortunately, Hurricane Katrina caused the event to be cancelled that year and I have not heard from Justin or his mom ever since! I've had many internet searches done over this course of time. But all that is listed is invalid info somewhere in Georgia.

Justin is now 16 making 17, and as IPNO (Innocence Project New Orleans) is making progress towards my exoneration, out of all the things I aspire to accomplish, salvaging my relationship with my son is at the very top of that list! So, Justin, if you're reading this, know that I love you and miss you, and will never forget about you!!! I hope to see you soon....

WHO AM I...WHAT IS MY PURPOSE?

BY EZRA RICHARDSON

Angola, 2012

Here I am; 37 years on Mother Earth, subtracting 15 years wasted away inside a system designed to kill all aspects of human existence. My once silent cries have morphed into intolerable screams. Who am I? What is my purpose? Why do I love, even though no one seems to love in return? Not intimately, no, my desire for life is upward of what is commonly held. I am here, here before you, before the world, not in a blasphemous sense. I am not God; however, I am of divine existence.

I am the son of a single parent. My mother is the daughter of parents who survived the South during a time blacks and whites alike were beaten, dragged, bitten by K-9's, shot, raped, and treated as playthings, treated as

projects. My name is confusing, more so to me than it is to the world. My name does not suit me; I should be called Uhuru, because I am free. Despite what the world says, I am innocent of sin, I am innocent of guilt, I am because I now understand. Again, who am I? What is my purpose? Why do I love...even though no one seems to love in return? This is my story.

For 37 years, I have lived in south Louisiana, subtracting the 15 years wasted here in prison. Irrelevant as the world may note it to be, I am innocent of all charges filed against me. That is my truth!

Here my plight is much different. I would like to shed light on the existence that is life for a black man, woman, and child alike. Having grown up within the confines of the strawberry capital of the state, I witnessed firsthand the effects of repression.

My mother, who was a single parent of five sons, was educated in paralegal studies, criminal justice, Christian theology, and agricultural science. Having found employment in a law firm of two prestigious attorneys and opening her own notary firm, she provided the best practical life skills any black female could offer, based upon her circumstances. She was a product of repression.

Having grown weary of a substandard lifestyle, I dropped out of high school a year before graduation. At the time, we had no lights, so we stole electricity by running several heavy-duty extension cords to our neighbor's home. The food we ate consisted of white and blue labeled commodities issued from the state's elderly assistance programs. Yes, we stole food also.

Sensing my mother needed help, I petitioned local businesses with employment applications, yet no one seemed to be hiring. The very businesses which received the bulk of our community's money refused to offer employment to one of their own. I went everywhere from grocery stores, banks, service stations, restaurants, and even slaughterhouses. Not once did any of them offer to look further than the scar over my right eye and the address on my application. After almost turning to the local farmers, I thought about my forefathers, who worked tirelessly in those same fields for pennies and dimes, only to later be accused of stealing a couple of bushels of greens and a bucket of fertilizer. Quickly the thought of being a field hand, a modern day reincarnate of my forefathers, existed in my mind.

With my mother psychologically aging and siblings starting to lose footing in school, I did what I had promised my grandmother I would never do. I started selling drugs and robbing people, my own people. Turning forty to eighty and eighty to one hundred sixty, the quick flips allowed us to walk through our mother's house without running into walls. It allowed my siblings to complete school without bothering themselves with being bullied because of their ragged and outdated clothes. My mother was able to complete more title transfers and federal tax filings for people who ended up not paying her.

After a while, depression took over and my mother started doing drugs. When money ran out, she began soliciting herself sexually in turn for crack. Upon discovering this, I became hysterical. Brandishing a .45 automatic, I held no mercy for the neighborhood drug dealers. Feeling like they were the reason behind my family's problems, I took everything I felt they owned of worldly value. It wasn't until I landed in the parish prison on aggravated kidnapping charges that I realized what the problem was. The problem was me!

Instead of fostering pride and doing the things which needed to be done educationally and economically, I played into the hands of the system. In order to succeed in this world, one needs to first discipline himself through education. In studying world economics, from both historical and financial points, the individual equips himself to proceed upright. This is the process we must undergo if we want to exist to see our community excel. Had I applied myself then, as I am doing today, my family, community, and self would likely be in better physical, financial, emotional, and psychological positions.

Today, the advice to all reading this, is to stop pointing fingers and being judgmental of each other. Our families, communities, and culture need us. Please, let's not be like the majority of the people we see in the media. Let's not be all talk; let's be intelligent; let's be rooted in truth; let's be.

Who am I? I am Ezra. What is my purpose? To love my people as I do myself, and not as the world dictates.....Uhuru!!!! I am Ezra Richardson...37 years old & an innocent.

JUVENILE LIFERS BY HENRY TAILEY JR.

Dear Ms. Sara,

I am writing this letter to close the gap of misunderstanding that people have towards juvenile lifers. I'm not blessed with the gift of smooth penmanship, so I'm going to explain my situation the best way I can. I was convicted for principal to murder. I was accused of being the driver to a drive-by shooting. Today I write as a man who grew up in prison. I'm not happy with the boy I was, but I have grown to love the man I have become. I am a man who wants to become his own more perfect creation, a man committed to the transformation of myself and the world.

I see all prisoners as victims of circumstances. A lot of us think like that in the beginning, and some people really are straight up victims. At first we say we're all political prisoners, because of the politics of the criminal justice system. Race is always an issue, no matter what color the victims are.

But, you know, as you get older you want to take responsibility for all of your life, because if you live long enough, you do good things too. I want to claim the good I have done, but if I'm responsible for the good, then I have to be responsible for the bad too, right? I'm truly innocent of this charge, but I'm guilty due to my character and the decisions I made in my life.

I always ask myself, "What does it take to change the essence of a man?" Then it comes to me...time and clarification on situations. I woke up one morning and found myself inside Angola. The system has this belief that they can teach discipline and understanding. You can't be taught that. You must discover that within yourself.

The development of the brain gives you that insight. Think of the average 15, 16, or 17 year old child. He can't even vote, because the world's not convinced that he or she can make an adult decision, but at that age he or she can pay the punishment for adult crimes and get adult time! I am nothing that they said I was; I am so much more than they thought I could be.

Help me, help you to help us. I respect the effort you are making to help our essential cause. I came from a family where mama was both. My father was in and out of prison. I want to break that on-going cycle. We need the world to understand that they, meaning the system, are robbing us out of our chance of becoming someone unique by locking us away in these prisons.

I leave as I came, ways of a warrior, code of a king.

Henry Tailey Jr. #378883

Angola Prison

DEAR SARA
BY DENNIS BROWN

Dear Sara,

In reference to your recent project concerning juveniles, I am inclined to share my ideas and prison experiences. The system's laws are designed to destroy one's mental state if he/she is not mentally very strong. I am a victim of the system, because I was tried and convicted of armed robbery at the tender age of 16 in 1986. However, the prison system has corrupted me mentally and physically, because I was forced to become a man inside a corrupt environment in order to live.

My mother was a strong black woman who raised seven children in our single-parent home without a male figure to assist her. Six of her children finished school and college, and they are living very productive lives in society. They are very supportive of me, even though I am the black sheep of the family. I can't say what provoked me to criminal activities, because my mother did everything in her power to provide and make sure that her kids had clothes, food, and all of the material things a juvenile could need and want to prevent them from crime!

Since being incarcerated, I have had to abandon my juvenile ways and mature as a man and live by the codes and principles they set as prison laws amongst convicts in order to be accepted and respected as a man. It is sad how I was forced to prove my manhood inside these prison walls in order to maintain my mental state and sanity.

I have matured in many ways, and today I encourage and teach youngsters coming in not to participate in homosexuality, gambling, borrowing, or placing themselves in dangerous predicaments that could affect their futures. Taking a child from his family at a young age affects both the child and the parent, because he is placed in an environment where the strong live respected and the weak fall victim to the prison life, because of fear. That has a lifelong effect! I advise any and every one going into the criminal field to strongly consider the effects of taking a child away from his family and loved ones and the mental and emotional damage this causes.

Good luck with your project and feel free to write if I can assist you in any way.

Respectfully,

Dennis Brown

Angola

P.S. I have 34 months before I am released.

THE VISITOR
BY JUDY DEMAREST

August 11, 2012

She sat down beside me, patting the place on the bench where her seven-year-old great grandson would sit. Noah was very tall for seven; his father must be tall too. She wore gym socks and bedroom slippers with her comfortable slacks and long-sleeved shirt.

"Have you been waiting long?" the grandmother asked me.

“About ten minutes,” I replied. “It was cold in there today. It feels good in here.”

“The AC wasn’t on in our room, but it was okay, cuz it was cloudy and overcast when we got here,” she answered.

We sat in the caged area waiting for the bus to take us back to the front gate, ready to leave Angola behind. We sat quietly for a few minutes, and then she began to share her story, like so many others had during my other prison visits. On the way home, loved ones always wanted to talk; maybe it helped to ease the pain of leaving their husbands, sons, fathers, and grandsons behind once again. Some had been making this journey for many years; grandma had been coming for two, but she would be doing this for the rest of her life.

She told me that he had his twenty-first birthday that year. Jim was just out of jail for a minor offense, one of a series, and eager to make a new start. He had been looking for a job and told her that it seemed impossible with his criminal record. That was when he started getting depressed. All summer he tried. He really tried to get work. He started saying that he would never be anything. She tried to reassure him, but he grew hopeless.

When the crime happened, he cried in her arms, telling her that he would never ever have hurt the girl. She was his only friend. He was trying to kill himself, and she was trying to stop him. The gun went off in their struggle, and she just fell to the floor. He would never have hurt her – never!

And then all of that court stuff. They didn’t have any money, so the court gave him a lawyer, one who didn’t care about him. They didn’t know anything about how all this worked, so they trusted the lawyer. She said that he should take the plea. That was a deal the judge was offering. If Jim would say that he was guilty of second-degree murder instead of first degree, the judge would have mercy on him. They didn’t know about these things, so Jim accepted.

Mercy? If that was mercy... Fifty years with no chance for parole! Actually, I thought I had read that the mandatory sentence in Louisiana for second degree murder was life without benefit of parole. What difference did that make anyway? To me, fifty years is life! And to this grandmother, it certainly was *the rest of her life!* It was an accident. Grandma didn’t find out until later that Jim had admitted to killing her on purpose. He didn’t do that. He’d never do that. And now, here he is behind bars for the rest of his life probably.

“How far did you come?” I asked.

“I live in Shreveport, but Noah lives in Dallas with his mother. I’ll drive him over to Tyler to meet her tonight. I’m seventy-two years old. This is so hard. It was an accident! It didn’t happen like they said. We didn’t understand. She promised him mercy!”

Grandma had told this story countless times, I am sure. Her voice was in a whisper, and I strained to hear her words. She was protecting the child; she didn’t want him to hear or see how upset she was. As she spoke, she touched his leg affectionately as he wiggled impatiently, playing with a small green plastic toy, which he repeatedly dropped on the floor. She kept her head turned in my direction.

“Your name is Noah. Do you like animals like Noah in the Bible?” I asked, in an effort to calm and distract the boy. “Do you have a pet?”

“Yeah, I did, but he died. He was a guinea pig,” the child answered.

“Do you like dogs? Did you ever have a dog?”

“Not me, but my granny has two dogs. They are brown.” He crawled across the floor to retrieve his plastic toy again.

Grandma wasn't finished with our conversation. "And here in Camp J, it is even worse," she continued. "The last time I brought Noah, Jim was in a dorm, so we sat at a table with him and ate lunch together. That was pleasant compared to this. No chains, no handcuffs, no wall between us."

"At least not a physical one," I thought.

"This is horrible. He was supposed to be in here for six months, but every time it's time for him to leave J, something happens. It's almost a year now." I understood only too well. It was horrible to visit in Camp J. I had come here today, thinking that Jerome was halfway through his time here, only to learn that he would be here for three months more than I had thought. Like Grandma, I was learning about all of this too.

Her story tugged at my heart strings, like so many others had before hers. Some had admitted guilt; some claimed innocence, and then there was Jim. It had been an accident. But all of these visitors suffered with the inmates. Almost every time I make the trip to Angola to visit Jerome, I make the return drive, carrying another heart-breaking tale with me. A tale of loss. A story of another family broken by this system.

I helped Grandma climb onto the bus, and we began the long ride back to the front gate of the prison. We passed inmates slaving away in the fields on one side, and a beautiful public golf course on the other, on our way to pick up another visitor. At death row, we were joined by a woman who sat down and excitedly told us that she would be coming back next weekend to "celebrate" her wedding anniversary with her husband. Another broken family, trying to hold on!

CAGED

BY JUDY DEMAREST

August 23, 2012

The sky was clear and blue, as I followed the guard through the gates of Camp J. This was the first time that I would visit in J when it was not raining. The rain had always granted me the gift of the empty cages alongside the walkway. Today I uttered a silent prayer of thanksgiving that my nagging fear had, once again, not materialized. The cages were empty. I knew that these fenced areas were for the men to "enjoy" outdoor recreation, but they offered little in that respect. The concrete areas were enclosed by wire fencing on four sides and covered above by the same. They were totally bare, not even a bench on which to sit. I stared at them, as I always did, trying not to imagine grown men inside of them, thanking God that they were not filled with men. It was my perpetual dread!

I made a conscious effort to put on my game face, as I entered GAR building for my visit. Jerome would be in that little room waiting for me. He had enough on his plate without me bringing in my fears. As the guard unlocked the door for me to enter the tiny space called "visiting area," I noted that Jerome was not present. I would have to wait for him today. The guard at the front desk had offered me the opportunity to order some lunch, but I had declined. I told her that I would not want to eat in front of Jerome, unless I was absolutely starving. He would not be allowed to eat with me, so I would forego the opportunity in order to show him respect.

After a few minutes, I heard the clanging of the shackles and chains, and the door on the other side of the heavily screened wall opened. Jerome shuffled in, wearing his orange jumpsuit and a host of restraints. In his heavily chained hands, he held a sandwich and a cup of yellow water, which might have been weak lemonade or Kool Aid. He came in smiling, as usual, and greeted me by saying that he was really surprised this time. This

was a game we played. I tried to surprise him with visits, and I never succeeded. He always knew I was coming! But today he insisted that he was really surprised, and I countered that I knew he was lying, and I would now give up entirely on trying to visit unexpectedly. All in the game! I knew he didn't know I was coming; he just always hoped so!

He opened his grilled cheese sandwich to show me what was between the slices of bread. I squinted through the wire screen to see faint traces of yellow masquerading as cheese on the dry bread. He nibbled on the sandwich as he talked, and left the cup of yellow water on the table in front of him untouched.

Jerome had great news! He was being moved to level three ahead of schedule. Then he would only have to stay at that level of lockdown for thirty days, and then he would be moved back into general population in the prison. His time in lockdown was being reduced by about ninety days. This was fantastic, because it would mean that he would again have contact visits in just about a month. This was the thing he missed most about being in Camp J. I was excited for him, and for myself as well. I would no longer have to endure the dizzying screen between us, and we would be able to share a meal together. He looked forward to taking photos together and to hugs. It stormed outside, during our two hours together. We could hear the rain beating on the roof and hear the thunder, but we could not smell it inside the windowless room. I thought briefly of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by Tennessee Williams. I had taught this play in American literature class so many times, always pointing out to my students that a storm was a symbol of cleansing for Brick and Big Daddy, as it was in many other literary pieces. Was that same symbol present here with us? Jerome was in such high spirits today. This visit was our best so far at Camp J. We had good news to celebrate, the guard adjusted the air conditioner so that I would not freeze, and we were allowed an extra fifteen minutes! What more could we ask for?

The rain had ended, when I heard the rattling of the chains at the door on my side, announcing the approach of the guard. He was kind in his announcement that it was time for the visit to end, and we quickly said our good-byes. As he escorted me out of GAR onto the walkway, the glare blinded me briefly, as the sun reflected off of the wet pavement. Before I began my traditional prayer for empty cages, my eyes adjusted to the brightness and saw five men in the cages on either side of me. They stood aimlessly, all the same, orange shoulders drooping, heads down, trapped inside the cages. Dreaded tears began to fill my eyes, and I know that my gasp was audible.

A very tall and well-built man in the last cage on my left stood with his fingers curled around the fence and greeted me with a smile. "Thank you for coming, ma'am," he said. "Don't ever stop coming. We need your support." I responded, but I have no idea what I said, or even if I could be heard, as the tears streamed down my cheeks. It was the first time I had cried at Angola. I didn't even cry when I toured the death chamber, but this was different. Mosi had offered to bring me to visit with him about a year ago, but that had never happened. Later, after I had had a special visit with Jerome in Camp D, Mosi reluctantly admitted that he was afraid I would cry the entire time we were there, so he had put off taking me. He had been surprised and proud of my control, but he could be proud no longer.

Mosi's prediction had finally come true. I was crying uncontrollably. The guard asked me what was wrong, and amidst my sobs, I told him that I couldn't bear the sight of these men in cages. "They look like they are in the Audubon Zoo in the monkey cages. What could anyone possibly think that this accomplishes?"

He responded, "I agree. It is inhumane and awful treatment. We used to have a fenced in area where the inmates could actually have recreation together. It was right over here." He pointed to a large grassy area, between the buildings. "But after that attempted escape, they changed it to this. It is horrible. I guess it's the only solution they could think of, but it is inhumane."

At the end of the walkway, as we approached a locked gate, the guards changed. A new man became my escort, and we walked silently to the front gate. I pictured Jerome in one of the cages, and swiftly forced the image from my mind. I thought about his willingness to exchange his outdoor recreation time for an extra phone call. I now understood why he and other inmates would choose to “sacrifice this privilege.” This was no privilege at all! This was mental cruelty, being treated as animals under the guise of recreation. The only thing they gained was a bit of sunlight and fresh air, but even that was tarnished by the experience of being caged as wild animals. Countless times I had imagined this day, but never had it been so horrifying!

I entered the caged room at the front of Camp J, to await the bus to transport me back to civilization. I heard the guard at the desk radio the driver to say that she had “traffic at J.” That was me...traffic.

Wait for the bus.... long wait!

Bus pulls up.

Stand at the gate.

Wait for someone to unlock the gate so that I can go outside.

Climb the steps to the bus.

Wipe away tears.

Put on game face again.

Say hello and smile at other visitors on the bus.

Ride to the front gate.

Walk to the car.

Leave Angola behind.

Nothing has changed outside the gates of Angola. Everything looks the same as it did when I drove into the prison parking lot, but I am not the same. I have been altered by this experience. The woman who entered Camp J three hours ago is not the same person who leaves. Something of her has been left behind...inside those cages, with the man who begged me to continue my visits...with the human beings who are being treated as animals, many with absolutely no hope of any “life” other than this one. I drive away from the prison at Angola, but part of my heart remains there, locked hopelessly with them.

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT BY MICHAEL WILLIAMS

Angola, 2007

Re: Forming an alliance of care, concern, and duty

Hello Youth Empowerment Project,

My name is Michael Williams. I'm 34 years old and from New Orleans. I've been incarcerated for the past 14 years, currently serving a life sentence with immediate plans of freedom. My past is very similar to many of our urban youth. I grew up relatively poor, a product of a single parent household. My mother was young with 4

children and wasn't as academically deft as she would've liked to be. She worked a series of menial jobs in an effort to raise and support her family.

Our unstable financial situation often led to us moving from one area to another. As a child, this caused me to not make many friends. By the time I was 13 years old, I'd been to 5 public schools as a result of my family's instability. Struggling to make ends meet caused me to feel need to assist my mother in her care-giving. I then turned to illegal activities.

In the streets I found what I now know to be a false sense of camaraderie and money. The false camaraderie enabled me to feel a sense of belonging and the money gave me enough to assist my family. During my junior high school years, I was mostly involved in petty crime and small scale drug activity. But, in my formative high school years, my involvement vastly increased and I was able to assist my family even more financially.

I was always an adequate student. I even finished high school and took the SAT. But the streets were like a light bulb and I a moth, addicted to its temporary and profitable attractions. As I became engulfed in the thrills involved in such a lifestyle, my mother would often admonish me, constantly suggesting legal alternatives for me to provide. But, like most youth in this position, I rejected her advice and continued to sink deeper into the quicksand pull of the streets. She soon grew weary, accepting that her oldest son's fate would be prison or death. She had 3 other children to raise. And me... I became the taker of the poison I sold, eventually becoming a heroin addict. My life spiraled quickly, and when the whirlwind subsided, I was in prison.

It's been during my imprisonment that I discovered who I truly am. I have evolved spiritually, mentally, and intellectually into a true child of God! And as a child of God, I am responsible for the spiritual, mental, and intellectual nourishment of the generations that follow. I've been tutor, counselor, and all around big brother to a lot of my fellow inmates. I am now pursuing a degree in Graphic Design, which will enable me to function in the modern world of technology upon my release.

I completely understand the power of positive action. And I sincerely believe that the youth in your care could, would, and should benefit greatly from my experience and knowledge of overcoming obstacles to achieve a greater good. I've done plenty of wrong as a child, thinking that those things were helping my family and me. And now that I've suffered my family and myself enough repercussions due to my unethical behavior, I will take pride in the privilege to do the ETHICAL things that will build a much stronger generation. I offer myself wholeheartedly to the children.

God bless you and thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Michael Williams

KATRINA'S VICTIMIZATION

BY EZRA RICHARDSON

Angola, 2012

On August 29, 2005, my life, along with the lives of people I do and do not know was forever changed. Being confined to a two-man cell no bigger than a Ford family van, I was forced to witness the devastation which was gripping a place I had grown to love—New Orleans. The Lower Ninth Ward was a place where several cousins and I had made plenty of memories. Those memories were overtaken by the waters of the very river where a lot of us first learned to fish, the Mississippi.

Although I am not a resident of New Orleans, I visited the city every weekend. See, I am from a small town called Hammond north of the lake. That is where all of my family with the exception of one of my favorite uncles called home. So when I awoke to witness the images playing themselves out on CNN with Soledad O'Brien at the helm, instantly tears started falling and my hands began to shake. Why was I affected like this when there was not any family in the area with the exception of Uncle Walter? Damn, this cannot be so. That was all I could think.

After standing, holding onto the cell bars, for what seemed to be three hours, I finally spoke. Seeing the freeman on his way to check the time clock, I stopped him and told him I needed to use the phone. Normally we would not be allowed out of the cells unless it was time to either go to work, shower, visit, or on the recreation yard. The freeman looked into my eyes and instantly my pain was felt. Neglecting to check the time clock, he went back up the tier and popped the cell door open. With nothing on my mind but assuring my family was fine, I called my grandmother. Hearing the panic in my voice, she had to be reading my mind, so she told me everybody was fine and that my uncle was with my Aunt Diane at her house in Ponchatoula.

With calm overtaking me, I told Grandma I loved her and to extend that love to the family. Relieved everybody was fine, I retreated to the cell and sat watching television for the next few days. There were not any issues with the television, because most of the guys on the tier were from New Orleans and surrounding areas. For the most part, my cell mate had it hard, because as we sat in that cell smoking cigarette after cigarette, we happened to be looking at the television, and he witnessed his sister and two of his nieces sitting on the Claiborne Bridge with an elderly couple, while floating in the water underneath was a bloated dead body. I cannot begin to explain the pain and hopelessness my cell mate felt at that time, but as I was later to find out, hopelessness and pain overtake all of us who have a personal stake in tragedy.

As days turned into weeks, we were finally given an outlet to call loved ones. I would like to think the system was doing us a favor, but had the phones not been set up, there is a strong possibility this prison would have been turned upside down. So in finally getting the opportunity to call my family, I called my Auntie Stella, feeling I could get a free call in to someone I had not spoken to in a while. I was surprised to hear my cousin, Tara, pick up. At the time, Tara was no more than twenty-one or twenty-two and, as I later found out, she had taken up permanent residence with our Uncle Walter.

I was glad to speak to my little cousin because she has always been like a kid sister. Tara always had me taking the defense in protecting her from guys her age and even older. She was good-looking and too young to have such grown physical features. In further talking to Tara on the regular phone on the tier, she told me she was caught in the city when Katrina hit. Without giving me full details, she explained only portions of what took place.

With most of the family being alright and other guys on the tier not being able to get through on the tier phone, I continued calling and speaking with my cousin every opportunity I got. At first I didn't notice that Tara was suddenly, after a few years of being separated from speaking with me, home every time I called. Not really reading too much into it, I went on with the dialogue of getting reacquainted.

One evening after I had come in from taking my shower, my cell mate told me about some foul incidents that had taken place in the Convention Center and Superdome. My cell mate knew about my cousin being caught in the city for Katrina, because we had talked at length about it. What I did not know was that reports had gotten out through people who had been transported to Houston and Baton Rouge regarding women and teenage girls being raped, and no one seemed to care. Shaking my head in disbelief at hearing the news, I sat on my bunk drying my feet, all the while shaking my head.

It was not until I started putting my sweats on that my conversations with Tara and her raw emotion or lack of emotion after being caught in the catastrophe began to make sense. With panic taking over, I asked for access to the tier phone, and as always, the security officer popped my cell door. Before I could begin dialing the numbers, my hands started shaking and eyes began producing tears. When the call went through, another cousin answered and accepted. Before she could get the traditional “what’s up lil cousin” out of her mouth, I asked for Tara. Sensing something was not right, she asked if something was wrong. Hoping Tara would have told her if something happened to her, I asked if Tara was either at the Convention Center of Superdome before she was evacuated. Hearing the question, my cousin got very quiet, which told me everything I needed to know. My worst fears had come to the light. Damn you, Katrina!

Tara was raped repeatedly by six strange men while taking refuge in the Ernest Morial Convention Center. Crying without a tear falling on my face, my mind went blank and emotions turned to hatred and anger. Requesting Tara to be put on the phone, her sister advised me not to pry because Tara was still in a tragic state of shock. Not really wanting to hear what her sister had to say, I literally screamed, demanding she hand the phone to Tara. By that time, it felt as though I had been abused just as my precious little cousin had been abused. I was helpless!

Picking up the phone, Tara did not say anything, but I knew she was there because I heard her breathing through the phone. Without her saying a word, I asked the question no one wants confirmation on. I asked if anyone had tried anything sexual with her. Hearing the question, she instantly dropped the phone and started crying. At that moment I felt nothing but despair. Damn you, Katrina!

How could I tell her she would be alright, when she had suffered the most degrading and dehumanizing incident any woman could ever experience. Helplessly, I just held the phone speechless. Never before has anybody in my family called on me and I was not able to assist them. NEVER!!! Now here my cousin, who has been like a kid sister to me, desperately cried out for my help, my protection, my love, and all I could do was stand there holding the phone. This is my new life; damn you, Katrina!

Days passed and I willed myself to at least try to express a brother’s concern, but the thought of six grown men taking turns sexually abusing such a helpless young woman troubled me to my very core. Why her, why Tara, why my innocent little cousin? Damn you Katrina. How could a group of fully armed national guardsmen and police not intercede for my cousin? And to think, Tara was probably one of many young girls who suffered such damned things. Damn you FEMA, damn you National Guard, damn you people who just stood there allowing such an inhumane act to take place. Damn all of you!

In early 2010, Tara finally was allowed to visit me. By this time, I had been reassigned to the main prison dormitory. It was planned for her to come, but what I did not anticipate was the air she would carry. See, Tara no longer desired to be intimately connected with men. The rape changed her entire outlook on men, period. Damn you Katrina! Taking in her overall appearance, I saw that she was still as beautiful as she had been when she was a little girl running around with her hair in a ponytail. Without effort, her presence brought a smile to my face.

After Tara had explained in excruciating detail what happened to her, my outlook on a certain character of people shifted. No longer could I tolerate sly comments made towards women as they passed, and no longer did I hold conversations with guys I figured to be offensive to women. For a long time, I could not talk to nor sit in the same room with guys I thought carried a trait identifying them as a rapist or womanizer. Damn you, Katrina!

Today, almost seven years since that fateful day Hurricane Katrina ravaged the city I had grown to love and the cousin I would give my life to protect was raped, pain, confusion, distrust and a total lack of forgiveness still

hover over my being. Trying to offset the post-traumatic stressors, I have diligently sought the counsel of my peers, people I trust. Learning to listen to the person and not feed off of perception, Katrina has left me in a state identical to that of the people who were victimized. Mentally, I am disoriented and confused. Damn you, Katrina!

NOT IN ANGOLA, IT ISN'T BY JUDY DEMAREST

July 29, 2012

Dear Warden Cain,

I am writing to tell you of an incident that occurred at Angola, the Louisiana State Penitentiary, yesterday morning. I drove from New Orleans in the pouring rain to visit an inmate. Before I left home, I checked the calendar because I am well aware that there is no visitation on the fifth Saturday of the month. Yesterday was July 28th, the fourth Saturday in July.

When I arrived, I immediately noticed the small number of cars in the parking lot and was curious as to why that was. When I climbed the steps to the visitors' check-in building, there were two families standing on the porch with a prison guard. The sign on the door read "NO VISITATION." I immediately asked the guard why that was the case, and her response was, "You should know that. It was in your visitation instructions. There is no visitation on the fifth Saturday."

I responded, "This is not the fifth Saturday. This is the fourth...7th, 14th, 21st, 28th. Today is the 28th. This is the fourth Saturday."

Her answer was, "Not at Angola, it isn't!"

I am livid! Not only was I standing there after driving all the way from New Orleans, but one of the other families had come from Texas, and the other from Michigan! They had driven hundreds of miles to visit their sons, only to be told that Angola uses a different calendar from the rest of the world. And the guard would not even let the people from Michigan into the building to use the restroom. She told them there was a restroom at the gas station on the highway.

This is horrific! These loving parents spent their time, money, gasoline, mileage on their cars, and emotions to come to visit their sons. They, and I, don't deserve this treatment. On my way home, I tried to come up with a logical explanation for this situation. I thought that perhaps they don't have visitation for the entire weekend at all if Sunday is the fifth Sunday. Okay, this made some possible sense. But then I learned that THERE WAS VISITATION ON FRIDAY! I know someone who went! So my possible explanation does not fly!

I almost always feel like there is a plot to discourage visitors when I come to Angola. The inmate whom I visit is currently in Camp J, and he has non-contact visits which are scheduled for two hours. The last time I visited, my visit was cut almost in half by forty-five minutes. Then I sat at the front desk of Camp J for fifty minutes, awaiting the bus to take me back to the front gate. I could have been completing my visit in that time. On another occasion, the entire visitor center in Camp D was emptied at 3:15 instead of 4:00 as scheduled, and approximately fifty visitors, including many very elderly persons and small children, were crammed, shoulder to shoulder, into the fenced room at the front of Camp D, where we waited for forty-five minutes for a bus to come for us. Sadly, there were not enough seats for the elderly, and several of them had to stand for the entire time.

Some of the guards at Angola treat visitors with respect, while others are downright rude and cruel. The administration needs to take a look at this practice. I have committed no crime and do not come there to be punished or demeaned.

Warden Cain, you have a reputation for prison reform. You are credited with instituting programs for inmate education and rehabilitation. Surely, you cannot condone this ill-treatment of visitors (or “traffic” as we are called by the guards). I cannot help but believe that the visits that inmates receive are helpful in maintaining order in the prison. Surely, this is a factor in keeping a sense of calm. Please accept my complaint in the spirit in which it is intended. Yes, I am angry. Yesterday’s incident did not need to happen. Things can be better! You have the power to make that happen. This rude and inconsiderate treatment of visitors need not continue.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this matter.

Judy E. Demarest

IN MEMORY OF AND IN TRIBUTE TO MICHAEL “CALI” LONG

Born: June 29, 1976

Died: October 15, 2012

Cali designed the cover of Go to Jail. After his suicide on October 15, 2012, Jerome Morgan urged his fellow inmates on Shark, 2/L, to work through their sadness, grief, and pain by writing. Several of them availed themselves of this opportunity, and their thoughts and feelings follow. They have asked that their writings be included in this work to create a memorial to their friend.

LIFE ON EDGE

BY DERRICK

Upon my arrival here on Shark 2/L, I was greeted by an old friend of mine by the name of Mike Long, better known as Cali, due to him being from California. I always been this type of person, in order for me to call you a friend, I must know what line of character the person is, and what you stand for, in order for me to call you a friend. I am writing to tell you of an incident that occurred at Shark 2-L tier here at Angola on October 15, 2012, Monday afternoon. Before I go into detail of this heart hurting disaster, I was told by Cali that he had a girlfriend he was writing and he was deeply in love with her, and by me knowing what type of person he is, I knew it was deep! He always told me what he would do if this girl ever left or played games with his heart. So I used to always talk to him, and he convinced me everything would work out for the both of them. So I left it at that.

Now a couple hours had passed and he started drawing beautiful artwork. I forgot to mention that he was a brilliant art crafter, as you know, because he was the one who designed the cover of this book. This artwork was for his love mate, Leighann Givens. Even though Mike didn't have any family members in Louisiana, I felt like he was a brother I never had, and I was honored for that opportunity. Now back to October 15, 2012 at approximately 5:00PM. Shift had just changed and I received some books from Mike within minutes of the event. The sergeant had come to let someone out for their hour on the hall, and Cali was next in line. Well, when the freeman opened the door to Cali's cell, all he saw was legs dangling, so he came down to see what or if he was coming out, and he noticed Mike hanging by a rope in his cell. Hold up, let me wipe my eyes. Yes, I'm crying, because Mike was family, not just in my life, but to everybody on the tier. That's how cool he was.

I love you, Mike!

From your lil brother Derrick

BROTHER CALI

BY ANONYMOUS

Brother Cali was born into a family of Hate; however such was not hereditary because his heart manifested love and compassion toward all mankind, even his adversary.

HARSH REALITY

BY MICHAEL CLENNON

I'm a man, incarcerated in Louisiana State Prison. I am housed at Camp J, a maximum security lockdown for the "alleged" serious rule violators.

This story begins and ends here.

I was placed on Shark 2-Left cell #8, level three tier. On this level, we are allowed the most privileges in this management program. The tier appeared to be filled with fairly decent inmates. Usually, I don't mingle to the point of getting to know lots of people. In this situation, I strayed away from my principle and had occasion to meet someone who unintentionally has had a huge impact on my life.

Michael Long... a-k-a "Cali" (short for California)

I remember the day we first talked. He called the name "Mike." So I answered, thinking he was calling me. He explained to me that he wasn't talking to me, that he was referring to the guy in cell #2. He joked by saying, "There's three 'Mikes' on the tier." He told me that not only was my name Mike, but his and the guy in cell #2 also. So, I replied by saying, "Well, I'm glad they call me Mike-Mike." We laughed. Then, he told me he's called "Cali."

From this day, we began to communicate daily. I began to really like him. His attitude was cordial and he was very smart. I discovered that he was also very talented. Cali had a gift with drawing.

When I first saw his work, I was amazed at how he had detailed the things he worked on. I've been here 16 years and his talent stood out above the rest. He's the best!!!

There were times when we shared. He was someone I could do this with because he was "selfless." Material things had no real value over being a friend. I liked that about him. I had occasion to read his case. My talents lie in the field of law, so he trusted my opinion would put him on point. When I completed this, I felt a bit down. To keep personal details out, I'll just say... his case was very tough. He'd have a very hard time trying to overturn it. I was honest with him.

Yet, there were things I could do, like helping him to complete his files.

In between this, we passed time talking about various things. He learned that I was musically inclined, as well. He would ask me to rap for him almost every few days. Most times, I declined because I have lost my drive to do music. He never stopped trying, until, one day, I did some songs for him. He really, really liked them. He couldn't believe I just quit.

Days went by. I saw lots of his art. This one day in particular, he showed me a collage of drawings on one page. You had to pay close attention because you'd miss something. This kid was real nice!

I can't say what happened from here. He drew something for a girlfriend of his. The art was beautiful. But in the center of the page was an actual heart. This wasn't the average Valentine heart. This heart had valves and was bleeding as if taken from someone's body. What was unique... there was a lock drawn through the heart. The girlfriend's name was on the lock as proof of ownership. I felt something then. What... I couldn't figure out. Some days went by and I still had the feeling I was missing something.

On October 15,2012... Cali hung himself.

That day he didn't seem like himself. Later that evening, he sold his radio for little or nothing. He sent me the headphones. I was baffled. Yet, I still didn't catch on. He gave away everything of value.

We started to talk. He wanted me to sing some rap songs for him. My lost passion for the art made me decline his request. He practically begged me. Finally, he said, "Okay, that's the last time I'll ever ask you to rap for me." I didn't hear this. I was told later.

When his tier hour came up, I came to the cell bars to talk to him, but he didn't come out. I kept looking and something didn't feel right. I screamed his name about four times, but he didn't respond. When I looked closer, I could see that he was hanging.

I watched the medical techs try to bring him back. This had to be the most painful thing I've experienced, besides losing my mother. They're saying he's living, yet brain dead. Others are saying he is dead. So, I don't really know. I'm caught between trying to figure out why he did that and whether I could've prevented it by simply singing some rap songs for him.

I don't know.

The things I've been through are far from average. But, I've never had a friend of mine commit (or try to commit) suicide. The two things I can't get out of my head are seeing him hanging and watching how lifeless his eyes looked when they passed my cell.

The reality of prison is harsh.

I've seen it.

Imagine how he must've felt?

MUCH LOVE, CALI!

Michael Clennon #323402

IN MEMORY BY ERNEST WILSON

This is in memory of the person who drew this book cover: Michael Long was a good dude, with a nice talent. I lived two cells away from Michael for about 55 days. All he did was make nice greeting cards and draw photos. He was well gifted with the talent to draw. He got along with pretty much everybody on the tier. On October 15, 2012, Michael Long committed suicide. I used to hear Michael say all the time that he didn't have nothing to live for, he had no family nor did he have any kind of outside help. Michael had practically gave up and I used to tell him it's not the end of the world, whatever you do don't give up. I don't know why he took his own life. I can only assume that he was ready to depart this world. He didn't show any sign that he would commit suicide, but you can't read what's on a person's mind. It really messed me up for Michael to take his own life. A day after Michael's suicide, I received a letter from my mother informing me that my cousin's son had passed away. He was about two months old. I brought this incident up to show you what prisoners go through.

Ernest Wilson #402468

A LETTER FROM MARK HALL #387077

October 18, 2012

The artist of this book cover, Michael Long AKA “Cali,” is a guy I met when I first arrived on Shark tier 2/L, a very well-mannered guy he was, with an amazing talent for drawing. Up until the day he committed suicide, one would have never suspected it.

Cali and I often talked about life, what’s going on in society, women, love, music, his artistic talent, and so forth (including the crime he was convicted for). Therefore, I got a glimpse of his mentality. I was the last man to see him alive. On lockdown, every person in a cell gets one hour on the hall as recreation time and during my recreation time on the hall I had interactions with him. Now that I look back on it, how he had all of his art work on display laying across his bed and cell situated, along with his demeanor, I could see that his suicide was something he had planned.

While I was on the hall, Cali seemed on edge. Though he tried to disguise it, I was able to detect it. We talked about one of his drawings I wanted to buy. He asked me to take his radio to a guy in another cell. I thought nothing of it, so I did. Then he asked me to take his headphones to another guy and I did that for him too. Then he asked me to take his magazines to another guy. I realized that he was giving his belongings away when he gave me two of his drawings, but I didn’t think he was preparing to hang himself. I just thought that he was tired of having them.

This situation has allowed me to reflect on my situation of confinement. His mentality versus my mentality. He was serving a hundred or so years for armed robbery. I am serving a life sentence for a murder. My co-defendant is alleged to have committed the crime, but because I didn’t report the crime to the authorities or assist the victim, they said this makes me just as guilty as the actual perpetrator who killed the victim. My point is I never once thought of committing suicide despite the situation. I have been incarcerated since the age of eighteen and next year will be eighteen years I have been confined, and I will never give up fighting for my freedom. Suicide is not an option.

I guess it’s safe to say that you never know what’s going on beneath a strong exterior and a smile.

MAY GOD BLESS THAT BROTHER!!!!

Respectfully,

Mark Hall, #387077, LA State Pen.

GOING BACK TO CALI

BY JEROME MORGAN

My short history of being acquainted with Mr. Michael Long, better known as Cali, is kinda chronicled here. Once Cali had taken the offer of designing the cover to this book, we discussed much of the book's content and title and he just took it from there. Quite a wizard of an artist, I would say!

As time went on, we would become somewhat closer, but I still sensed a distance that always used to nag me when I found myself questioning why he refused to let go of the pain from his past. For the most part, I understood it to be that my half-full glass and his half-empty glass was exactly the same, but just that much different. My own low times of wondering if it would be better if I was dead than to be caged up in the pit of Angola caused me to look deep within myself to find that goodness I believed was also embedded in others. I might be far out of touch with them... or maybe right in the cell next to some, but I would never know if I didn't pay more attention to the goodness in myself and not the fact that I'm not yet full of goodness because of my faults or misfortunes.

Indeed, Cali was a good person! Yes, he committed a crime, maybe even more than one crime. But this one he was serving time in Angola for was a 2009 armed robbery conviction. Nobody was killed and nobody was shot. Of course, I feel sympathy for the fright the victims of the store robbery may have suffered from being held up with a gun, but if you would read the victim's statement in the case, you would find out that Cali even apologized for that. Something the court of law just overlooked, I guess, or didn't think Cali deserved any justice based on all the specific facts.

I'm just beginning to realize that maybe Cali never knew what it felt like to be treated as a human, much like a military soldier is conditioned to not acknowledge compassion, which sometimes sends them into a similar fate. Cali grew up not having any family at all—relative or non-relative! He grew up as an infant being tossed from institution to institution, which more than likely treated his being as merely a specimen of flesh rather than a source of spirit. Somebody needs to thank God that Cali didn't decide to commit mass murder before deciding to take his own life. That's just my unprofessional opinion. Yet this is a new experience for me. Never have I been acquainted with a person who suffered with such a fatal degree of pessimism. I never recognized it to be that severe! Cali possessed so much value as a person, not just as an artist. And it's a pity that he never was able to see his true worth.

He was placed in Camp J for tattooing in the dorm at Camp D a year ago. In September, he was reassigned to "extended lockdown," where the most notable added privilege is being able to watch T.V. while still being confined to a cell for 23 hours a day. However, he was still backlogged and couldn't wait to be transferred to the reassigned location. He was eager to get back in population so he could get in the hobby shop and work on his art.

My hopes were that Cali would feel a sense of accomplishment and be further encouraged by his drawing being chosen by SAC to be the cover of this book. It gives me quite a pause that today Cali is no longer living due to suicidal fate, considering the overall message and cause that gave effort to all the writing within the book's cover. Yes, this system of incarceration causes far more tragedy than it prevents. And as Cali's voice speaks through his meticulous illustration, please allow me to duly say,

"AMEN."

INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA

BY JERRY D. BROWN

Louisiana State Prison at Angola, LA

Submitted to Judy Demarest's Social Concerns Class

March, 2012

What does it mean to live in the United States of America in 2012? Who truly benefits from a democratic society that prides itself on a free market? Should the three basic essentials of food, water, and shelter ever be in question in a civilized country? All of these questions may be easily answered by some, but to a certain group, these questions have become a horrifying statement of confusion. Homelessness in the U.S. is a testament to the declining culture and dysfunctional politics of our nation.

Around the world, there is a common perception that Americans are so well-off and comfortable. For example, on the television others see the tourist attractions, the beaches, the hotels, amusement parks, and the high fashion clothing Americans wear. In addition, they hear of all the opportunities this nation affords average people to become successful. Most importantly, people around the world see the democratic freedoms the citizens of this nation enjoy as opposed to other nations of the world. All these elements of perception have made America a smoldering pot of nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, and multicultural constituents. However, what reality are they actually experiencing after years of citizenship?

For the last thirty years, in almost every major city in the U.S., there exists a group of human beings who are devoid of livelihood. When I say devoid of livelihood, I mean homeless. Homeless people actually make up a nice sized quantity of our nation's population. These people have made their homes in alleys, on sidewalks, and in some of the most hostile environments known. These are also Americans, Americans who have fallen or been forced out of the job market, and now, because of demanding utilities and mortgages, have succumbed to the streets. Although homeless people have multiple reasons for their situations, cities have formulated shelters for citizens like this, but the problem itself still looms. So the question is asked, "How would an intelligent society such as the U.S. alleviate itself of this anomaly?"

Whenever attempting to understand any effect one has to first investigate a cause. America is a place, but freedom is a state of being. So, is it possible to live in America and not be in a state of freedom? The answer would have to be an emphatic, YES! Mentally, we perceive everything promised to the average American, but the reality or outcome of those promises may never come to fruition. This reaction produces despair, a type of mental prison. This despair carries on an entirely different intensity when surrounded by the vanity of American lifestyle. Therefore, when you allow the materials of your life to cancel out the humanity within you, you've become exactly that...homeless.

Americans have sought ways to curb this problem of homelessness. Aloof politicians and an increasingly corrupt culture aren't doing much to help. "We the people," as a foundation statement of our government, should never be in a position of neglect. If we are to uphold what truly sets this nation apart, then we must attempt to rescue those in our society as if they were us, ourselves. This is America. That is what being American is all about. The wealth of the world could never be more important than the man, woman, or child without a home.

THE PROSECUTION RESTS, BUT I CAN'T

BY JOHN "J.T." THOMPSON

Director of Resurrection After Exoneration

New Orleans, LA, April 2011

I spent eighteen years in prison for armed robbery and murder, fourteen of them on death row, waiting to be killed. I've been free since 2003, when I was exonerated after evidence covered up by prosecutors surfaced just weeks before my final execution date. Those prosecutors were never punished. Last month, the Supreme Court decided by a vote of 5-4 to overturn a case I had won against the prosecutors and the district attorney who oversaw my case, ruling that they were not liable for the failure to turn over that evidence. That evidence included proof that blood at the robbery scene was not mine.

Because of that Supreme Court ruling, prosecutors are free to do the same thing to someone else today.

I was arrested on Martin Luther King's birthday in 1985, in New Orleans. I remember the police coming to my grandmother's house, after she heard that they were looking for me and called to tell them that I was there. We all knew it was the cops, because they banged on the door and then kicked it in. My grandmother, my mom, my little brother and sister, my two sons, ages four and six, and my girlfriend were there with me. The officers had me on the floor with guns in my face. I guess they thought they were coming for a murderer. The children were scared and crying. I was 22 years old!

They kept me in the homicide division from the time of my arrest to try to get me to confess. They played good cop, bad cop, and then they sent a black dude in. He told me he thought I didn't do it, but my name was popping up too much. He asked me why and went through my wallet, asking about family photos, trying to sound like a nice guy. He played me a tape of Kevin Freeman saying that I committed the murder. Freeman was arrested that day also and charged with murder, but he put it on me. "I didn't have anything to do with it. Get out of my face. Don't tell me that you think I did this and that." He left. They brought me down and charged me with first degree murder and put me in the parish prison. Freeman had been down there in the tier and had circulated a rumor that I had ratted on him. Because of what he said, I went in as a rat. They hate a rat.

My picture was on the news, and a man called in to report that I looked like someone who had recently tried to rob his children. Suddenly I found myself accused of armed robbery too. I was tried for the robbery first. My lawyers never knew that there was blood evidence at the scene, and I was convicted based on the victims' identification.

Just a few weeks later, I went on trial for the murder charge. I was innocent of both crimes, but I couldn't prove it. They didn't let my lawyers see the police reports or the evidence that showed my innocence. My lawyers thought it was best if I didn't testify at the murder trial, so I never defended myself, or had the opportunity to explain that I got the ring and gun from Kevin Freeman. And now that I officially had a history of violent crime—the conviction for the armed robbery—the prosecutors were able to secure the death penalty.

At my sentencing, two weeks after the trial, the judge told me I would be put to death. He told me that a jury of my peers had found me guilty and he told me the number of volts of electricity that they would put into my body to kill me in the electric chair. He said that if the first attempt didn't work, they would put more and more volts in until I was dead.

On September 1, 1987, I arrived on death row in the Louisiana State Penitentiary – the infamous Angola Prison. I was put into a dead man's cell, a man who had been executed several days earlier, and whose

possessions were still there. During that summer, eight men had been executed at Angola. I had already lost one appeal and my execution date had been set. I didn't understand the law. I had a date; I thought I would be killed on that day. The atmosphere up there was scary. We were all scared. They were killing people, one after the other. They put me in a suicide cell so that I couldn't hang myself. Within two weeks of your execution date, they put you in a death watch cell. The last thing they want you to do is kill yourself. They want to do that.

Over the years I was given six execution dates, but all of them had been delayed. Finally, all of my appeals were exhausted, and the seventh, and last, date was set for May 20, 1999. My lawyers didn't tell me that they were coming, but they flew in from Philadelphia and walked into the visiting room on death row. I knew as soon as I saw them what was going on, even before they opened their mouths. On death row, they serve you an execution warrant every time you have a date set. My lawyers wanted to tell me about this warrant before it got to me through the prison. They said it would take a miracle to avoid my execution this time. Those lawyers had been with me for eleven years, and I figured that it was just my time to die. I told them it was OK. I was innocent, but I understood how the system worked.

When they told me the date was May 20th, that sounded familiar. I had just read a letter from my son telling me that his high school graduation would be on May 21. He wanted to go on the senior trip, and his mother couldn't pay all of it. I had written him and told him I would take care of the rest by selling some of my stuff like my typewriter and radio to pay for the trip. "Oh, no," I said. "Hold on. That's the day before John Jr. is graduating from high school." I begged them to get my execution delayed. I knew that would really mess him up. My lawyers told me that they would try, but they didn't think they could get it delayed just because my son was graduating. They told me that no judge would be bothered by that. I was messed up.

On the next day, an article appeared in the New Orleans newspaper about my execution. Not aware that I was John Jr.'s dad, my son's teacher read it aloud to the class. I assume she didn't mean any harm by doing that and was trying to encourage the students to be careful in the choices they make. He didn't know yet that I was going to be killed. He learned it from his teacher, reading the newspaper aloud to the entire class.

When I heard that this had happened, I panicked. I had to talk to my son. My mama and his mama wanted to get the teacher fired. I told them that the teacher probably wasn't trying to do it like that. She couldn't be that cold-hearted. I just needed to talk to him to get him to stay in school and graduate. I can't imagine what would have happened to him if I had been executed. The son of one man that I knew who was executed only lived for two weeks after his father's death. He got himself shot. I believe he just didn't care to live after there was such a fuss on TV and everything about his daddy being executed. During the fourteen years I spent on death row, twelve men I knew were put to death.

Then the amazing miracle happened. On the same day as the lawyers' visit, an investigator they had hired to do one last investigation found a report of the perpetrator's blood type from the armed robbery case. It wasn't my blood type, and that proved I didn't commit the armed robbery. They later found names of witnesses and police reports that had never been disclosed before. They showed I wasn't the murderer either. These reports had been hidden for fifteen years, and never turned over to my lawyers. When the armed robbery conviction was overturned in 1999, I was removed from death row. Then my murder conviction was thrown out, and in 2003, I was re-tried and the jury took only 35 minutes to acquit me.

In 2005, I sued the prosecutors and the district attorney's office for what they did to me. The jury awarded me \$14 million in damages, \$1 million for each year I spent on death row. This was to be paid by the district attorney's office. This is the verdict that the Supreme Court has just overturned.

There were four prosecutors involved in my court case in 1985, who all knew there was blood evidence in the armed robbery case, but none of them told my lawyer about it. That's not all they hid. The truth didn't come out until years later, when I sued them for wrongly convicting me. The jury at my civil case heard it all. Between them, they suppressed ten separate pieces of evidence that showed I was innocent of both crimes.

They are still able to practice law today.

I truly don't care about the money. I want to know why the prosecutors who hid evidence, sent me to prison for something I didn't do, and nearly had me killed are not in jail themselves. Why didn't the state attorney general investigate this? Why didn't the ethics board investigate? Where is the Department of Justice? I just want someone to be held accountable and face consequences for what they did to me and to others. No one has been held accountable. Not one of them! We'll never stop people from cheating and playing dirty with other people's lives if there are no incentives for them to stop. No ethics charges, no criminal charges, no one was fired, and no one can be sued. That is scary!

Worst of all, I wasn't the only person they played dirty with. Of the six men one of these prosecutors had sentenced to death, five eventually had their convictions reversed because of prosecutorial misconduct. Because we had all been sentenced to death, we all were entitled to court-appointed lawyers for our appeals. I was lucky, because my lawyers went to extraordinary lengths. But that is not the norm. There are over 4,000 people serving life without parole in Louisiana, and almost none of them have lawyers to handle appeals, because the courts are not required to appoint them. Why isn't anyone looking at their cases?

If a private investigator hired by a generous law firm from out of town had not stumbled on the blood evidence, I would be dead today. My life was spared despite the efforts of many prosecutors who sought my conviction and execution, and then fought to uphold it for over eighteen years.

A horrible crime was definitely committed. They are the criminals...not me!

CHAPTER TWO: JEROME MORGAN

FROM THE RIVER TO THE LAKE

BY JEROME MORGAN

I'm writing from a location in Louisiana known as Angola. This is an area that was initially an 18,000 acre slave plantation which now operates as an 18,000 acre maximum-security penitentiary in which the Mississippi River surrounds 3/4's of its area as you enter through Tunica Hills on an eerie stretch of a 22-mile snake road. Due to me not having very much research material to dig into, I haven't been able to figure out why a slave owner would have the audacity to name this land after the African country where the great Queen Nzinga outrightly fought against being enslaved by the Portuguese!

Section 1 of the 13th Amendment (adopted December 18, 1865) in the U.S. Constitution declares that, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." This means that "slavery/involuntary servitude" is legal upon being convicted for a crime. Therefore, in Louisiana this "punishment for crime" is prescribed in being sentenced to hard labor, which in Angola mostly consists of working in the fields picking and planting farm vegetables, digging ditches, and cutting enormous areas of thick high grass down to the dirt with dull-ass hand blades. Would you even imagine that this place also has its very own mostly white neighborhood that houses many generations who have been working here as prison guards since its more brutally explicit days? Try to picture that for a brief moment. . . Oh, and did I mention that those who refuse to work, don't work at a fast enough pace, or get written-up for one of the many other disciplinary infractions are placed in one of the several cages on lockdown at a place here called Camp J, which is a location with the nerve to be adorned by a lake. I must tell you that on lockdown prisoners are subjected to the psychological madness of all day/every day isolation which often results (subconsciously or consciously) in misdirected frustrations and excruciating outbursts of anguish. This system is designed to force a prisoner back to doing the hard labor without too much of the resisting attitude he may have had before. Keep in mind that much of the Angola personnel (black and white) are more than likely considered to be poor, not professionally trained, and woefully inept in their own self-education which further aggravates the myriad of challenges already posed by an inefficient correctional system. There's an extremely high degree of discriminatory practices that have been wedged for many decades in Angola between those that are physically imprisoned here and those that are mentally imprisoned here . . . that goes for prisoners and the prison administration alike! Unfortunately, this writing doesn't afford me the amount of time necessary to share with you every important detail of which I know about the intricacy of cruel inhumanities going on in this awful place. However, I will say that the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola is a place where the days of well over a century ago have conformed their evils into the modern times of today. . . .

I've been at Angola nearly 17 years by being wrongfully convicted for a murder I'd had absolutely nothing to do with. The incident occurred during a sweet-sixteen birthday party given by a female student at McDonogh #35. To make a long story short, my name came up in rumors of who the shooter may have been due to my style of clothing being in close resemblance to the group of guys fighting against the sixteen-year old teen who was killed and his friends. The NOPD detectives seem to have taken advantage of that by manipulating a couple of witnesses who were friends with the victim to identify me as the shooter to cover their asses because the victim's mother was voicing her outrage against the city for not bringing her son's killer to justice! My whole quest to one day prove my innocence is how I've gained the pleasure of meeting Mr. Brandon Early (Mosi Makori). He and countless others who work at the Innocence Project New Orleans (IPNO) have finally secured

enough evidence to bring forth my innocence in court. Needless to say, their assistance has been one of the main reasons why my sanity has been able to survive this torturous ordeal....

When I first arrived at Angola, I thought I had been zapped back into the 30's with all the fields and fields of farmland and pastures, dirt roads, cows, horses, donkeys pulling wagons with an old inmate wearing a straw hat and dingy clothes steering its way, mostly black men lined up two by two marching to work under the authority of rifle-toting whites on horseback! I was very deeply infuriated at the conditions under which we were forced to live and work, and how it all seemed to disrupt any spirit of freedom and/or redemption.

I immediately thought to myself, "This is the type of slavery I'd been taught was abolished long ago!" My initial placement here was in a two-man cell with a guy who had already been incarcerated for 22 long years and remains at Angola to this very day. Mind you, I was a rather small statured fella' at eighteen years of age during that time. Luckily, this guy's mindset was not of the normal devious nature that was typical of a lot of other older prisoners during my arrival. Which means, my cellmate didn't believe in using his experience here at Angola as any kinda advantage against my naïveté. If such had been the case, I would have found myself in a dreadful predicament where I could have been easily forced to defend myself. My first week here, a guy was killed by his cellmate. However, to the contrary, I'd been able to feed off of my cellmate's apparent disgust with "the system"...

A large part of the reason why I was so vulnerable to the sufferings of such an unjust imprisonment was due to my upbringing. I'd been raised in foster care since the tender age of three all the way up until being incarcerated. For the most part, I'd lived in a middle-class foster home on Mithra St. in Pontchartrain Park until a day after my 16th birthday. While growing up there, with a family who had shown me, my older brother, and my lil' sister absolutely no affection at all, fortunately I'd found haven from the emotional neglect in the welcoming feel of mostly all of the families of the many friends I'd made, participating in the neighborhood park activities, attending Mary D. Coghill Elementary, and Bethany United Methodist Church every Sunday for Sunday School. I'd participated in a lot of the school field trips, won school talent shows, Black History projects (one class-project was even presented in person to the MLK center in ATL), and Pontchartrain's "NORD" (New Orleans Recreation Dept.) Park sports. "The Park" (which is the nickname we so passionately referred to our neighborhood as) also had a grown man's softball league, which would play against other NORD parks, that almost everybody and they mama used to go to many nights during the spring, summer, and fall months, while us kids played basketball, touch football (or pitch-up tackle), or we would be on the park playground swinging, sliding, climbing the monkey bars, eating popcorn, nachos with cheese and jalapeno peppers, cold drinks, potato chips, and hot dogs sold from the park's concession. We would also go to the other parks in the Lakeshore Division and do the same things (Joe Brown, Milne, Gorretti, Kenilworth, Delgado, Digby, and Willie Hall). "The Park" even had its very own stadium named Barrow Stadium, located at the very beginning of Joe Bartholemey Golf course where we would play a lot of our NORD football games on weeknights....

Although mostly all of these fond memories I'd experienced without the much-wanted presence of any parents (biological or foster), I must say that those same experiences afforded me a tremendous amount of pride in the togetherness of my community! Me, my siblings, our friends, and the other three children living at the foster home where I'd spent much of my life would go all over the neighborhood trick-or-treating every Halloween. Out of all these various occasions, my foster mother would at least make it a point to be present when I participated in the annual holiday plays and Easter egg hunts. When I was six or seven, she also enrolled me into the New Orleans Museum of Art's school at City Park, which I would attend on Saturdays. She was also the one who brought me to the T.V. station to do a segment I was chosen for by Coghill called *Kids' Break*, which was aired during the time when after-school cartoons were being televised. My foster mother also took us on vacations almost every summer (Disney World, Sea World, Disneyland, Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon, Nashville, Atlanta, DC, Philly, Atlantic City, and New York). In addition to that, she also upheld a long tradition of going

to as many parades as possible during Mardi Gras season, which were “beaucoup” (French for “a lot”)! In the wee hours of Fat Tuesday mornings, we would pack up in her van with blankets, food, and snacks that would last us throughout the day and camp out on a spacious lot located right off of Orleans and Claiborne Aves. so that we would be in walking proximity of all the day’s festivities. I remember one time, while awaiting the MLK Day Parade on Rampart St. in front of Armstrong Park’s entrance, I’d ventured off alone and accidentally fell into one of the many ponds as I was exploring the park’s grounds....

After graduating from Coghill, I enrolled in Francis W. Gregory Junior High for 7th and 8th grade. For 9th grade, I was accepted at 35 to begin my freshman year of high school. For some reason or another, I’d lost interest in my 4th period English I class. This led me to cutting that class and hanging in the hall during second lunch period so I could meet up with this girl that I liked. Needless to say, as a result of not going to my 4th period class, at the end of the school year I’d received an “F” in English and was not allowed to return to 35 the following school year because of having a failing grade in that one class. Pontchartrain Park’s district school is JFK Senior High, so I’d enrolled there for my sophomore year. Just before the end of that school year (one day following my 16th birthday), I was removed from the foster home in “The Park” and placed in the care of my mother’s older sister, who was living on Franklin Ave. in between N. Prieur and N. Johnson. As a consequence of changing residence, I was disallowed to attend Kennedy for my junior year because I was no longer living in its school district. Therefore, for my junior year I ended up at Francis T. Nicholls (which was renamed Frederick A. Douglass about four years after). During the summer after my junior year is when the incident took place which caused my wrongful imprisonment. For my senior year I would have only needed two credits plus an elective to graduate from high school and pursue my aspirations of attending Howard University to study psychology....

Growing up I was never encouraged to ask any questions, so I became a rather reserved-mannered child who would just try to figure out things myself. I was never told why me and my siblings were placed in foster care or ever told of any significant history of my biological family. I wasn’t even taught the true reasons behind much of my city’s traditions and its history against injustice, or the origins of religion. During my adolescent years, my real mother would catch the city bus to come pick us up to spend the weekend with her. She would often take us to the French Quarters where we would stroll up and down Bourbon St., Canal St., Jackson Square, the Riverwalk, and sometimes catch a movie or two at the dollar show. In those years my mother was living on S. Miro St. in the Calliope Projects. Sometimes during our visits, we would also spend time with my grandmother and her husband, my grandmother’s sister and brothers, my mom’s two older sisters, and my two cousins who all stayed within walking distance from each other in the 8th ward area, and also swing by my great-grandmother who lived in the 7th ward on Paris Ave. They were a relatively poor, close-knit family. And I’d seemed to establish a developing relationship with most of them. Nonetheless, I didn’t get opportunity to meet my dad or my mom’s only brother until I was 16 or 17 years of age, when they both were released from Angola on separate charges. Unfortunately, a couple months prior to me meeting my father, my mom was also incarcerated. Only after a couple years of my own incarceration, I learned that my mom was never taught how to read and write. My older brother was arrested a couple months before I was, for a crime that occurred on Mardi Gras Day, and ended up doing time with me in the same cellblock unit at Angola. He was later murdered on France St. three years after winning his appeal and being released from prison. From the time of my inception here at Angola, I’d received full support from my grandparents until they eventually passed away, and limited support from my sister, my aunts, cousins, and my friends from “The Park” who knew of my innocence firsthand because they were with me at the sweet-16 party that night, to which they all testified at my trial to no avail. I gather that it’s difficult to expect a whole lot from a circle of loved-ones who are struggling on a daily basis to make means for themselves and their own families. Along with the fact that they believe my situation calls for a miraculous act of God because this situation tends to be too burdensome in regards to their

time, energy, and capabilities. Nevertheless, don't think for one second that the overall system which we are all struggling to free ourselves from isn't designed to be as daunting as it so often seems....

In light of all this, most people would be more inclined to believe that I would ask for nothing more than to get out of Angola, move as far away from Louisiana as possible, and never-ever look back again. On the contrary, that line of thinking couldn't be any further away from the truth! When I think back to my own personal journey from Lake Pontchartrain to the Mississippi River and all areas in between, I notice that there's a thriving spirit within my being which desires so much to have justice and equality afforded to all underprivileged communities in New Orleans and throughout the state of Louisiana. I've always felt that this state was more culturally enriched with African ancestry than any other in America to allow the soul of their sufferings to live in vain. Only after reading a book of writings by New Orleans' school students entitled *The Long Ride* and learning some very dignified, unconcealed truths about the lengthy history of our fight for liberation in this state, I feel very much more obliged to contribute my life in a manner that respectfully pays homage to invaluable sacrifices of great people like our own Robert Charles, Maria Stewart, Homer Plessy, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Juan Malo, and the swamp communities (common-unity) the maroons and the other people of color who escaped slavery had organized over eight generations ago....

To actually reach a point of our own adequate self-governance, it's most important to "overstand" that unaffectionate relationships and miseducated communities continuously result in disparities that constantly feed the annihilating machine of incarceration. To establish healthy relationships we simply must show interest in one another's well-being despite any "mistakes" one may have made along the way. It's indeed possible to discourage the seed of ignorance with an authentic compassion of care and concern, coupled with a realization that to "know thyself" is the fundamental basis of true education. "Educe" is the root word for education, which simply means to "bring out" the empowering gifts that God has already blessed you to have. Once we become fully acquainted with those indestructible, innate abilities, our communities will find themselves on the vigorous path of "manumission"!

I know that I'm no historian by far, although I so earnestly hope that in this writing I am able to relate to you in ways that will reciprocate the universal energy I've gained from reading *The Long Ride*. In such spirit, I visit you from my current position along the Mississippi River as these thoughts are traveled to your location in the city south of Lake Pontchartrain. I look forward to the honor of joining your efforts much sooner than later...*Sum-mum Bonum!!!*

SUPPORT FOR A CASE OF ACTUAL INNOCENCE

BY JEROME MORGAN

July 1, 2003

My name is Jerome Morgan. I've been wrongfully convicted, due to misidentification, for a second degree murder case that occurred Saturday night, May 22, 1993, at the Howard Johnson Lodge on Old Gentilly Road. A party was held in the Ballroom of the hotel to celebrate a young lady's sixteenth birthday.

Late that night arguments started between two groups of peers on the dance floor. The tension erupted into a brawl, which led to one of the participants firing a gun. Three young men were injured, which left one of these victims fatally wounded.

I was in attendance, before and after the disruption, along with four friends. We were among ninety other party-goers who witnessed the altercation leading to the incident, which took place in the location nearest to the only entrance of the area. Mostly everyone found safety away from the gunfire by remaining inside the

room heavily towards the rear. Prior to the shooting, my friends and I were standing near a speaker at the rear of the room. So, I myself found protection by cowering under the D.J.'s table at the second sound of gunfire along with two of my friends and a couple of other individuals.

Minutes after the life-threatening noise discontinued, the security guard on duty, who was stationed at the door with a metal detector frisking party-goers as they entered, took further action by not allowing anyone to exit or enter the premises. My friends and I then noticed a mutual associate panicking from injuries he suffered from being involved in the commotion. We proceeded to calm this person until paramedics arrived.

Uniformed police officers arrived promptly, investigating the scene while everyone remained locked inside the premises. Discovering the victim lying near the entrance as being deceased, officers immediately requested the assistance of homicide detectives. Some officers were dispatched to survey the perpetrator's escape route indicated by friends of the deceased, while other officers marked off eight bullet casings surrounding the deceased victim's body as evidence. Homicide detectives barricaded the entrance with tables to interview and make records of everyone remaining on the scene before being allowed to return home. This document reveals my information as they interviewed me that night, which makes an account of my whereabouts while the shooter was seen being chased by a participant in the room.

Surprisingly, my picture was composed in a photographic line-up conducted by detectives who were investigating allegations from one of the surviving victims injured while attempting to break up the fight. This person made statements that misidentified me as the shooter and picked my picture from the lineup. I was arrested at school October 7, 1993. This information failed to warrant an indictment, due to contradicting information given by the other surviving victim and negative identifications recorded from the deceased victim's friends. One in particular chased the actual shooter away from the scene. This person picked my picture and stated, "It wasn't this person, I went to school with him." Accordingly, I was released from detainment on December 16, 1993.

Approximately a month following my release from jail, the deceased victim's mother exercised her resentment, through the news media including newspaper articles, concerning the results of my arrest. She demanded that the authorized officials try and convict the person she felt was responsible for the murder of her son. This grieving mother accompanied her son's friend to the district attorney's office and homicide unit and convinced this witness to alter his statement, claiming that the head detective misunderstood his previous statement of certainty. This witness reiterated his information in terms of being shocked that a person he attended school with murdered his friend. This account was accepted as evidence of identification. Consequently, I was re-arrested Thursday morning, April 21, 1994, at my girlfriend's apartment.

This case was brought to trial September 7, 1994. The state of Louisiana presented five students who attended the party on the night of the incident. One person was the deceased victim's cousin, who could not recall seeing me or my friends at all during the night. Two of the deceased victim's friends, who were involved with the fight, also testified that there was no recollection of my friends and me from the night of the shooting. These same witnesses did identify both injured victims who were involved in the fight. And also, one witness testified to seeing the perpetrator fleeing the scene after the shots. The surviving victim, who was shot while attempting to break up the fight, misidentified me as shooting a gun from my location at the rear of the room. The prosecution's final witness, who previously gave contradicting information to detectives, gave testimony that I was the person who murdered his friend, and he ran after the shooter until the shooter escaped over a fence through a dark alley.

Continuing with trial procedures, the defense presented its case of innocence to the jurors. Represented by "state-appointed" counsel, five students were called to the stand to testify under oath about the night in question, including me. Three of these witnesses were the friends I attended the party with. Each of them gave

their testimony without any discrepancy. The witnesses testified that we all were standing at the rear of the room, near the D.J.'s table while the altercation occurred. At the sound of gunshots, we all ran and hid behind the D.J.'s table. One of my friends stated that he ran across the room into an adjacent area where the restrooms were located. This is also the area where the other surviving victim, also a defense witness, had retreated from the altercation occurring at the entrance area. The surviving victim's testimony substantiated the fact that my friends' and my only involvement in the incident was aiding him with his gunshot wound until the paramedics arrived. I also utilized the privilege of testifying on account of my innocence.

Police officers and homicide detectives involved with this case took the stand to elaborate on the events as they took control. The officers stipulated that they promptly arrived, securing the scene, not allowing anyone to enter or leave the premises. They immediately took notice of the body of the deceased victim, along with the eight spent bullet casings at the entrance of the room (indicating the location of the shooter). The fingerprints found on the bullet casings have yet to be questioned. Detectives' testimony revealed that statements, names, addresses, telephone numbers, and other information were taken from all remaining party participants. All this was done before an individual was allowed to go home. The actual records were not disclosed at trial. Officers and detectives testified to them being given the perpetrator's escape route, which was offered from the witnesses testifying on behalf of the prosecution. But to the contrary, the head detective testified that he, himself, interviewed me after the shooting.

Unjustly, the jury returned with a verdict of guilty. On September 14, 1994, I was sentenced to a mandatory term of life imprisonment without the benefit of parole, probation, or suspension of sentence. I filed for an appeal, without any representation, from the lowest court up into the highest court authorized to correct wrongful convictions. Every pleading was denied despite the obvious evidence that supports my innocence.

During my incarceration, I purchased a portion of the state's records connected to this case. Within the records were subpoenas for a video tape, which has never been mentioned in this case. I also found the information of approximately ninety individuals who remained on the scene giving statements to the detectives about the occurrence of the incident. Unfortunately, these documents do not disclose those actual statements. There's no record of information given from any of the "only" three adults present on the scene of the crime. The security officer who was on duty, the chaperone who was the hostess of the event, or the disc jockey who provided the music were never called to testify at trial. Records also show, following my release, the mother of the deceased visited the district attorney's office and New Orleans Police Department's Homicide unit, accompanied by her attorney on January 5, 1994, to express her stern disapproval towards the city for not convicting her son's murderer.

The exonerating facts of this case are overwhelmingly substantial. I persist in diligently seeking support and dedicated assistance in the denunciation of an unjust act committed by a system obligated to seek justice, not merely to convict. A criminal trial is about more than winning a case, but so that justice shall be done in which the guilty shall not escape and innocent shall not suffer.

I am making a plea to your concern of responsibility, through citizenship of our country, in protecting its most essential foundation ---- JUSTICE. I also pray that you apply your resources of investigations and/or representation in exercising the truth of innocence for this cause.

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,

Mr. Jerome Morgan, L.S.P. #344592

REASONABLE DOUBT

BY JEROME MORGAN

What motive did I have, in committing murder in this case, when it was stated repeatedly by prosecution witnesses that my friends or I were not involved in any sort of conflict between the deceased and his friends?

How could it be possible that a Head Homicide Detective would misunderstand a witness identifying a person during a photographic line-up?

How can the perpetrator escape the scene, while being chased to a certain point, return to the crime scene to aid a victim and be questioned by detectives, and not be recognized by any of the ninety remaining people at the crime scene?

Where was the weapon if the perpetrator returned to the crime scene?

How can the shooter be positioned at the rear of a large room occupied by ninety individuals, shoot randomly, and only injure subjects at the entrance of the room where all the spent bullet casings were found?

How could the perpetrator be shooting from the rear of the room and make an exit ahead of the subjects fighting when the state's witnesses testified they retreated to the entrance at the sound of the first shot? (There was only one way in and out.)

Why wasn't the security guard, who also had a metal detector the entire night, ordered to testify at the trial?

Why wasn't a portion of the ninety individuals at the party called to testify to any of the events surrounding the crime?

Why weren't the fingerprint test results that were performed on the spent bullet casings introduced at trial?

Why wasn't the videotape disclosed at any time during the investigation of the case?

Why wasn't Jerome Morgan acquitted of these charges, when all the evidence supports his innocence?

FIRST LETTER TO JEROME

BY JUDY DEMAREST

November 4, 2011

Dear Jerome,

I am Judy Demarest, a teacher at Sci High (Science and Math High School). I am sitting in the courtroom this morning, behind your mother and aunt, and next to your cousin Jonathan. I teach a class called "Social Concerns," and we have focused on your case this semester.

My class was unable to come because our field trip was not approved by the principal. The students were very disappointed, because they are extremely supportive of you. We have just finished reading the transcript of your trial, and no one in the class could believe that you were found guilty.

I have been friends with Brandon (Mosi) for several years, through Students at the Center and the Innocence Project. I am so proud of him in his efforts to free you and his dedication to this quest.

Brandon has promised to bring me with him when he visits you. I am eager to meet you. Finally seeing you in person this morning is a start, but I want to be able to talk to you.

Jerome, I have always believed in justice and that God will be sure to have justice ultimately prevail. It is certainly taking a long time, but with all of those who believe in you and your innocence, surely that time must be coming soon.

I would like to correspond with you. If you will write to me, I will be honored. My address is:

XXXX Avenue

XXXX, LA 700XX

My students would also like to write to you. Our school address is:

Social Concerns Classmates

c/o Ms. Demarest @ Sci HIGH

5625 Loyola Avenue

New Orleans, LA 70115

Brandon shared your beautiful long letter with our class. Your vocabulary is amazing, and your narrative style is impressive. I am an English teacher, so that is a very high compliment coming from me. :)

Jerome, you are in our thoughts and prayers. I look forward to meeting you personally, and I will follow and support you until we can greet each other as two free human beings. That day is certainly coming soon.

Sincerely,

Judy Demarest

GREETINGS JUDY DEMAREST BY JEROME MORGAN

November 15, 2011

Greetings, Judy,

I hope and pray all is well! It's sorta difficult for me to even begin to put into words just how much of a pleasure it truly is to receive a letter from you, written while you were in the courtroom at my hearing, informing me of your presence, in addition to the compassionate support and social concern shared by you and your students in regards to me proving my innocence and finally regaining my freedom! However, for such reasons, I truly feel waaaay beyond thankful for the utmost level of interest afforded from everyone at Sci High!!!

I'm deeply sorry that the class was not able to make the arrangements that would have allowed them to accompany you at the hearing on yesterday. Nevertheless, you can certainly expect a letter to arrive at the school's address, inviting them to the continuance of yesterday's hearing which is scheduled for Thursday, December 1st. I also apologize for not being at liberty to acknowledge your presence on yesterday. Unfortunately, I was only able to turn and glance into the audience quite seldom. I didn't wanna exhibit any behavior that coulda been interpreted by the judge as causing disruption in his courtroom. Plus, at the same time, I was also trying my best to remain calm and focused because the air-conditioning was keeping me somewhat jittery as I was preparing myself to take the stand on my own behalf.

Oh yes, I absolutely agree that Mosi is very much a blessing and purposed at being of great impact to the cause of truth, justice, and humanity! He has also shared with me some delightfully lofty things about you. Therefore, I'd be quite honored myself to have you visit me in a more appropriate setting, where we can meet face to face and talk. I look forward to that, as well as your correspondence.

Yet again, I thank you immensely for all that you are doing, not only in the context of your support to see justice prevail in my life, but also for the devotion you give to your students and the more daunting conquest at large! Included with the letter to the students, you will find the fall 2011 issue of IPNO's newsletter. Within its pages are articles on page 6, explaining the progress of my case in the federal courts, and an article on page 8, which I wrote about how the situation has affected the relationship with my seventeen-year-old son. I personally entitled the page 8 article, "Justin's Injustice." I would like for both articles to be read by your class. This is my only copy of the newsletter, so if it's not too much of a burden, could you return it whenever you come to visit along with one copy of each article? Along with your professional opinion about how the page 8 article is written. Thanks! Both for your assistance in the aforementioned matter, and for the "very high compliment" regarding my previous letter that was shared with your class.

Hope to see and hear from you soon.

Wholeheartedly, Jerome Morgan

ESSAY ON JEROME MORGAN BY JOHN MASON

2012

My experience with the Innocence Project and working with Jerome's trial has been a great and educational one. Through the project, I learned about what these innocent people are like. I have gained a new friend and teacher in Jerome. I enjoy writing letters to him in class and I will continue to write letters to him outside of class during summer break. He is an inspiration to me and he always writes back with something wise and very inspirational to say. I have grown a clear understanding of how innocent prisoners are treated and I appreciate their courage and ability to persevere through their tough time in Angola.

Through this project, I have now started to feel for those people and I have developed a love for helping them to get out and gain their freedom and their civil rights. I love how, even when the prison system tries to take them down, they still get back up. I think that working with the Innocence Project in Interact class gives us the opportunity to act and help others outside our school in a deeper and very encouraging way. It inspires me to be willing to get to know these people and help them through their tough time in prison with words of inspiration from the heart. I am really hoping and praying that Jerome can be free and can see his son. I wish the best for him and his family, and I will continue to write to him to give him inspiration. I would like to say God bless to this program, Jerome Morgan, and the people they fight for. I would also like to say that I hope that it can spread and continue to bring freedom to those who have been incarcerated and falsely convicted.

LETTERS OF HOPE BY MARIA JAZWINSKI

January 2012, I switched from home-schooling to public schooling. This was the second time I had made the transition from home-schooling to public-schooling. When I was choosing my courses, I found out I had an

empty spot that had to be filled. Being a sophomore, I couldn't take a free period or use that period to be a TA, which was meant for seniors only. So I picked a random class and that was social concerns. When I first came to the class, it was already second semester and the class was in its full swing peak. One of the projects was writing letters to an inmate currently residing in Angola. Though everyone else had been writing to this inmate for a few months, I was given the chance to write to him as well. After my first letter was sent, I moved out of the class because it did not fit into my college plans. I needed three sciences a year for a good college resume.

Even though I left the social concerns class, I still did continue writing to Jerome, the inmate in Angola. Jerome was in for murder; he was in for life. The reason I kept writing was because I found Jerome to be a very well-educated man and to this day I believe he is innocent and always will think so. The letters I have exchanged with him have proven he is a lost and confused man, yes, but a murderer? There is proof that Jerome did not commit this murder and he is currently working to get an appeal. I have read through these letters about Jerome's hardships and worries, and I am touched. He has written about his anti-social issues, the abuse he has undergone through his guards, his personal issues, and his everyday issues. I must say I have also opened up to him with a few issues of my own and have found positive results in his thoughtful advice. A few other students writing to Jerome have also opened up and found hope and security from his words. Jerome, be he in prison or be he with the general public, has been an inspiration and hope to others in his position and to the young souls he has exchanged letters with.

I remember, in one of his letters, he had a meeting about his appeal on the fourth of March and he took that as a sign, "march 4th, gotta march on forth" is what he wrote to me when he found out there was some hope. Jerome may not be a genius, he may be in Angola, and he may have made a few mistakes, but he is one of the most genuine people I have come across in my short seventeen years of living. He has been an inspiration to my classmates and me; we all hold the hope that one day he will be free and able to continue his life as a standing member of society. When I started this project, I expected to write to a hardened criminal with little to no education. What I have found, instead, is a soft soul, struggling through tough times with his head up and ready to face challenges. What I have found is an intellectual with a thriving personality and soul. What I have found is hope that there are good people out there with good intentions. I will continue sending these letters of hope and stand by his side as he goes through these challenges. I will continue to hold these letters of hope to my heart. God bless these letters of hope and my friend who writes and receives them.

THE BREAKDOWN OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY BY JEROME MORGAN

"It takes a village to raise a child."

—African Proverb

The FAMILY structure (mother, father, child, sister, and brother) is the most basic unit within the fabric of our society. Then there's the extended family which consists of grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins, and others who may not share a particular ancestry, but do share a close friendship of common goals and values to a point where this person actually feels like one of your relatives. Families build into a community that establishes the very strength of our society. In such cause, it is important to acknowledge that the thread of these commonality components can only be distinguished by the care, concern, commitment, and love of all its members.

In my own personal experience, I was born into a situation where my mother could not read or write, my father and uncle were incarcerated, and my aunts and maternal grandparents were struggling to keep their own

households intact. I've never known my father's side of the family. These dysfunctions caused my family to place me in foster "care" at the age of 3, along with my two-year-old sister and six-year-old brother. In the foster home's household, there were an elderly mother and father, their adult daughter, and three other foster siblings of me and my siblings' age. On its surface, it would appear to typically consist of a fundamental social unit. However, in large part, the genuine care, concern, commitment, and love that is necessary to fuel the productivity of the various forms of a family structure was nonexistent – as it seems to be in our overall society today.

During the time that I was being raised in foster care, I had the privilege of making a lot of friends in the neighborhood and at school, very few of which had both parents. Most were in single-parent/female-headed households, and quite a few were being raised by their maternal grandparents. As I grew older, I also established a relatively close relationship with my mother, grandparents, aunts and cousins who were my mother's siblings' only two children, one of which was being raised by our maternal grandparents. However, his sister was being cared for by their mother. The father was also not a part of their lives.

Family? Well, what appears to be the most striking similarity in the breakdown of this structure as it pours into the community and the society it reflects, in all my years of living, is the lack of care and concern about the significance of the male figure's absence (father, uncle, brother, etc.) in our families. No one can deny that females outnumber the males in most of our communities. Why? Well, I would like to bring attention to arguably one of the main factors that we all should be aware of.

During a recent visit from an attorney who once worked on my case, he stated his belief that "prison is a symptom of a society failing!" This sentiment made perfect sense to me for a multitude of reasons. Nonetheless, it all reverts back to "the breakdown of the American family" due to imprisonment accounting for a gigantic portion of why so very many of our much-needed male figures are being ostracized from the very fabric of our families, communities, and our society.

The National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals recommended in 1973 that "no new institutions for adults should be built and existing institutions for juveniles should be closed." This recommendation was based on their finding that "the prison, the reformatory and the jail have achieved only a shocking record of failure. There is overwhelming evidence that these institutions create crime rather than prevent it." For reasons much deeper than this one essay would allow me to explain, in less than a span of one generation, the American penal population exploded from around 300,000 to more than two million! The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the entire world, dwarfing the rates of nearly every developing country, even surpassing those in highly repressive regimes like Russia, China, and Iran. In Germany, 93 people are in prison for every 100,000 adults and children. In the United States, the rate is roughly eight times that, or 750 per 100,000. The racial dimension of this rate of incarceration is its most pathetic feature. No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. In Washington, D.C., our nation's capital, it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison. Similar rates of incarceration can be found in black communities across America. Louisiana leads the entire nation with its rate of incarceration today.

Indeed, this issue spills into every other matter that our society is faced with. However, as it pertains to the framework of a FAMILY, prison not only banishes the male figure from just a few of our families, the rate of incarceration today displaces other neighboring males in the community from fulfilling such a role in the lives of those children who don't have a committed example of a caring male in their own FAMILY. As a matter of fact, prison actually creates a deep silence in communities of color, seemingly rooted in shame. What I mean by this is that imprisonment is considered to be so shameful that many people avoid talking about it, even

within their own families. Some are silent because they blame themselves for their children's fate and believe that others blame them as well. Others are silent because they seem to believe hiding the truth will protect friends and family members from the adverse judgments of mainstream society.

As a result, in communities devastated by the rate of incarceration in America today, many of those struggling to cope with the stigma of imprisonment have no idea that their neighbors are struggling with the same grief, shame, and isolation. This type of phenomenon has been described in the psychological literature as "pluralistic ignorance," in which people misjudge the norm. When it comes to families of prisoners, their underestimation of the extent of incarceration in their communities exacerbates their sense of isolation by making the imprisonment of their family members seem more abnormal than it actually is. Even in church, a place where many people seek solace in times of grief and sorrow, families of prisoners often keep secret the imprisonment of their children or relatives. Far from being a place of comfort and refuge, churches can be places where judgment, shame, and contempt are felt most acutely.

In this manner, you should be able to realize how this breakdown in the American family structure ultimately disrupts the strength of our communities and weakens our society as a whole. Obviously, there is something very disturbing about not having an immediate and stable male example of genuine care, concern, commitment, and love in our households and communities. I believe we all can agree that FAMILY can very well be anyone who shares your own compassion and integrity. Nevertheless, we should also agree that having younger men and older men to fulfill the responsibilities of the male figures in our families (father, uncle, brother, etc.) is equally important in the upbringing of our children. Therefore, in conclusion, I leave you with a quote from Kahlil Gibran, "You are bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth. The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far. Let your bending in the Archer's hand be for gladness; for even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is 'stable.'"

MY NEW DAD & ME

BY TAREIAN KING

You ever had a diary before? A book that you just can write how you feel, your ideas, your thoughts, your mistakes, your pain, your fears, just everything in? A diary that created the space for you to be able to vent and to be honest with yourself without being judged wrongfully? Maybe it wasn't a diary. Maybe it was a pet or a stuffed animal when you were a kid. How did you vent? How did you let things out? If you didn't let it out, why did you hold it in? What kept you silent? I was always afraid that people would judge me. I didn't want them to define me by looking at my mistakes and my bad decisions. I never vented to a human being. I trusted diaries and my best friend, Samantha. She was a poodle. I knew the diary couldn't judge me, and I knew Samantha wouldn't judge me. After my dog died, I would just write. That was my way of venting. If I didn't write, I kept it in. I never in a million years imagined I would soon have a dad placed in my life whom I could tell everything to and not be judged.

A protector, a supporter, and a believer in the power of love. My new dad. My new dad means the world to me! We can't spend time together because we live in two different cities. He doesn't let that restrict him from being a fantastic father and taking care of his responsibilities. He's everything I ever wanted in a father and more. I just light up when I think about him. He protects me in a way that no policeman, no counselor, no psychologist, etc. could ever do. He protects me from myself and this world. He protects me from boys. He protects me from life. How? Knowledge. He gives me knowledge, and I use it as a weapon against everything. I know I can always turn to him for advice. Do I make mistakes? Yes. I am only human and my dad understands

that. We have a relationship that can't be broken. A relationship that holds no secrets. When I do make a mistake, I feel comfortable informing him about it. Is he ever disappointed in me? Yes, but he never stops loving me and supporting me. He doesn't scream at me, or belittle me. He teaches me to learn from my mistakes and how to not let them keep me down.

Sometimes when teenagers praise their parents and tell the world how they love them, it's because their parents usually are the type of people that try to be their child's friend. Don't let yourself for one second think my new dad falls into that category. When I make mistakes and I tell him about it, I don't just get off the hook. He'll tell me what I did wrong, why I shouldn't do it again, and then give me some background information or tell me about a similar experience he had if there is one. Sometimes he'll understand my reasoning behind it, but that still doesn't make it okay or right. Honesty works both ways in our relationship. I'm honest with him, and he's honest with me. Half the time, I learn my lesson just from knowing I disappointed him. When I'm tempted to do something that I think isn't right, I think about whether or not my new dad would approve it. If it's something I have to think about, I know he wouldn't, so I just don't do it. I love my new dad.

Most kids have parents that they're too afraid to talk to. Sometimes, I find myself just wishing I could share him with teenagers who don't have a dad like him. He wouldn't mind. He'll take on any child in need of protection, support, and love. He doesn't mind putting the time in where it's needed or where some man wasn't willing to do it. You don't have to be his biological child, that doesn't make a difference to him.

When my new dad came in my life, I was at war with myself. I was mentally battling with myself, and I had begun dealing with my problems in a whole different way than writing. At the time, I realized that I needed a new method because the old one wasn't working for me anymore. Before I could look for something, my dad was instilling all types of knowledge in me. He was working on my self-esteem without even knowing it. He would tell me that I was beautiful, strong, and intelligent. He built me to start loving myself and to realize that I was indeed beautiful, strong, and intelligent and I deserved the world, but at the same time he also taught me how to be humble.

My dad teaches me a lot, and I teach him too. He doesn't think he's too old to learn new things or that his 18 year old daughter can't teach him anything about life. During my senior year, I took AP English through the Students at the Center community at Eleanor McMain. That was the best class in my whole school life. I learned so much, and I wrote a lot. We would write like ten papers or more a week in addition to having to read work from writers like Amilcar Cabral to Aristotle. My dad didn't graduate from high school. He doesn't have any PhDs or anything, but he is so intelligent. If I didn't understand something, or wanted different views on an assignment, or just wanted to share some knowledge with my new dad, I could. I would send him the material, he would read it, write about it, send it back to me. I could share it with my class. I read Assata Shakur's autobiography my senior year, which was the best book I have ever read. I loved that book, and wanted my new dad to read it too. I had the book delivered to him as a birthday present. My dad has no easy life. His job is so demanding. When he does have extra time he's often tired, but he still managed to read the book. I was so happy he loved it. He even referred it to some of his friends to read.

I'm a writer. I love to write, and I always share my writings with my new dad. Can you believe that he gave my writing to someone to read at an open mic before? He couldn't hear them read it, because, like I said, his job is so demanding. That meant the world to me. He shocked me, but that's my dad. One time he sent me something in the mail, and it was addressed to 2012 Bard College Freshman (underlining it twice) Ms. Tareian A. King. My face just lit up. He is proud of me, and he doesn't mind sharing my accomplishments to the world. That's my dad though. Always supporting me and loving me. Usually boys bond with their fathers and girls bond with their mothers due to similarities. My gender doesn't stop nothing in my relationship with my father. We talk about black women, we talk about "weaves and such" as he calls it, we talk about Remi, and "trades"

(boys that are attractive). Even though I'm a girl, my dad still bonds with me and tells me what he thinks about this kind of stuff. Every time he gives me advice he gives me his opinion and brings facts, history, and knowledge to the table. Even if we don't have the same idea or views, we still respect each other's thoughts.

I can go on and on and on talking about my dad. I can write a whole book on how he makes me feel. He's my human diary. He's like that pet, stuffed animal, basketball, or baseball that a kid reached out to for comfort. He's like the marijuana, alcohol, the heroin, crack cocaine, sex, gambling etc. that adults reach out to when they get lost in their problems and can't deal with them. If everybody had a dad like mine, humans would be more at peace with themselves. All of the bad things and bad methods you can use to deal with problems in the world wouldn't even matter if everybody had a dad like mine. If I ever were to run across someone who was in need of love and support, I wouldn't hesitate to give them my father's contact information. That's just how great he is. I wouldn't even have to ask for permission. He's everything I ever wanted in a dad. A protector. A supporter. A believer in love.

Afterword

The dad that I spoke of is Jerome Morgan. His demanding job I spoke about is him being an inmate. He has to wake up at a certain time, work out in the hot fields for long hours, eat prison food, get solitary confinement, be treated as if he's everything but human. He has been wrongfully incarcerated for 18 years. I met my new dad during my senior year at Eleanor McMain. A SAC staff member who was working on his case introduced the class to who he was, what he had been charged with, his story etc. His address was put on the board for anyone who wanted to write him, and we would read letters from him in class. I went into writing my new dad just being passionate about the Criminal Justice System, not knowing that we would bond and he would be the dad to me that my biological father failed to be. My biological dad was like the Zatarian's shrimp pasta in the frozen section at Walmart, and Jerome was the shrimp pasta my grandma cooked. Jerome doesn't pretend. Our relationship is real. He isn't an imitation of anything.

The majority of people don't like the idea of people judging them. Nobody wants to be judged on their mistakes and errors. Who are we as humans to judge each other? Being human means you're not perfect. You need love, you need some type of support, you need to socialize. Humans need humans. Although, we shouldn't judge people from their mistakes and bad decisions, we do it every day. I wanted to share what my new dad was to me with the world, but I didn't want anybody judging him wrongfully. I didn't want people to concentrate on the fact that he was a prisoner at Angola through the whole piece that they would be blind to the wonderful father he is. I am not blind to the fact that some people look at people who are incarcerated as if they are monsters and so violent. This is how society portrays them. Well, however you look at prisoners, they are capable of loving and supporting people. Jerome is not the only man in prison who can love, teach, and guide a child. There are free men who can't be the father that Jerome is. They are doctors, lawyers, artists, and actors who never will be able to be the father that Jerome is. I didn't put that he was a prisoner in my piece because I wanted the world to see him for what he is and not his situation. Jerome is protection. Jerome is support. Jerome is love. Jerome is the father that billions of men fail to be. Jerome Morgan is my dad.

DEAR JEROME

BY WESLEY ALEXANDER

Dear Jerome,

Although I don't really know you, I believe that you have really made an impact in my life. I know I haven't been on this Earth long enough to really do something epic, but just to know that students like Tareian and myself make a difference by supporting you almost gives me strength to continue helping others by doing what I feel is human. Growing up in a world that exists beyond the walls of a prison hasn't been so free for me. That's why I sympathize and feel connected to you in this abstract way. I too await to one day be set free.

The struggle for existence took its toll on me once I opened my eyes to this cold world. My three sisters and I all have different fathers, but unlike their fathers, my father abandoned me before I could retain a vivid image of how he looked while I was a curious toddler. Well, unless seeing him once or twice a year on those random nights when he was drunk or guilty about me, his estranged son, counts. I always put on that painful smile when people ask me, "Damn, you mean to tell me that you're the ONLY boy in the family?" You see, I never had a male figure in my life, ever. No uncles, no cousins, no nothing. My mother has always been my support when I needed her, and my sisters are aggravating and bothersome as ever, but at the end of the day I'm still left halfway filled. I always ask myself all these questions: Why do I feel depressed all of a sudden? My mama is here, so what more do I need? Then the reality always hits me when I see that foreign image I wish was familiar within my memories. That boy with his dad. "Father-son time," isn't that what it's called?

That one scene created many nightmares for me. I slowly became entrapped within my dreams and desires of having the male figure I never had. The feeling is excruciating to experience. Consequently, when I'm alone with enough time to myself to think deeply about my surroundings, the overwhelming feeling of loss floods my veins. The feeling is so strong that it reminds me of my grandmother's death when I was eight. My mother fell to her knees and screamed in tears to the ceiling, "What will I do without my mama, Lord?!" The abandonment of my father is no different than death to me.

Then you know what hurts the most? No one understands this loss – this emptiness within me. I remember in 2003 when my father popped up at my house the week before Christmas. "What the fuck you want, Henry? This boy needs clothes. You never pick him up to go shopping or nothing!" Me, being the shy kid I was, just stood in the shadows of the argument and watched in hope that his eyes would turn my way as I stood behind my mother. Years later, I asked my mother while driving home from school, "Do you think child support would solve anything?" She stared at me for a second and focused her attention back to the road. Money fills up banks; it can never fill the hole in my soul.

I stopped looking for a figure in my father once someone else decided to fulfill that role. This occurred just last year on December 12, 2010. I'll never forget that date. My father randomly visited me again, and this time I decided to answer the door. My mom was in her bed asleep, since she had to work that night. I peeked through the crack of the blinds, and I saw him, smiling confidently with that sinister look on his face; it always sends a chilling feeling down my spine. I immediately stepped back away from the door and began to panic, wondering what I should do. Suddenly, I began to think of the usual things my mother would say. Of course, that was of no use to me. So, I summoned the feeling of loss. Those dreams of spending time with a father and going to those stupid football games where drunk people yell and scream. I wanted to ask him why hadn't he been there for me, his son? I fiercely opened my door and went to confront him.

"What's up bruh? You gonna gimme some dap?" he asked.

“No, but I wouldn’t mind shaking your hand,” I responded.

“Shaking my hand? Now here you go acting like your damn mama.”

“Well, she has been the one taking care of me for all these years.”

Our conversation was going nowhere. I could not make him understand how I felt. Therefore, since everyone holds God highly these days, I asked him, “Do you think God is smiling down at you right now?” He laughed and said, “Yes, I know he’s smiling at me. Why wouldn’t he?” I was shocked and almost speechless by his arrogant response. At that moment, I knew he didn’t give a shit, and I regretted opening the door, especially when I smelt that nasty-ass liquor all over him.

“Do you like girls, boy?” he asked.

“What the hell do you mean, do I like girls?”

“Look if you gonna grow up and be gay, then I really don’t have shit to do with you.”

I really felt like shit when he told me that. I couldn’t move at all. I guess he wasn’t expecting me to speak eloquently or carry myself in a manner that does not give homage to the “typical nigga” stereotype consumed by others who embrace white supremacy beliefs. He forced me to reflect on my childhood without him.

My years in elementary were the worst times of my life. Since I was short and visibly fragile, I was the target of every bully. My mama took me out of Paul L. Dunbar Elementary School after some kids tried to flush my head down the toilet. My mama cried after I told her what happened. She took me aside and told me that I needed to learn how to fend for myself. Suddenly, she punched me in the stomach, and I burst into tears. I did not understand why she did such a thing.

“Hold up your fists,” she ordered.

“Why mama?” I asked.

I didn’t know if she clearly understood me due to the broken sound of my voice. When she didn’t answer me, I looked directly in her eyes and saw how they sparkled and overflowed with tears. I wiped my face with the sleeve of my jacket and did as she told me.

As I progressed throughout elementary school, I was called a “fag” and sometimes “gay” because I would rather much read a book or write a fiction story than play “it” or “man on the run” with my classmates. One day, after school, while I was on the schoolyard searching for my mother in the mass crowd of parents, I felt something hard as a bullet strike me in the back of my head. I swiftly turned around and spotted one of those overgrown kids who took pleasure in fucking with me. I don’t know what came over me. The temperature of my body seemed to have increased, and I ran towards his ass and punched him one-two-three-four times in the stomach, just like my mama taught me to. My second grade teacher saw what happened, but she didn’t say a thing; she knew how badly I was treated. When I saw the tears roll down his sorry-ass eyes, I began to pity him and turned around to find my mother smiling at me, illustrating that she did a hell of a job of assuming the role of my forgotten father.

All types of memories raced through my head as I stood face-to-face with my father. The fact that he was never a part of them weakened me, causing my face to lower to the ground. The only thing I could say was that “Fuck you!” line my mother always uses. Before I could roll the words off my tongue good, he had me by the collar of my shirt. I was able to stare into his cold eyes. I saw it all. His vision including everything but me.

I'll always remember that day. I don't think it's possible to forget. All he did was dig the hole deeper with his shovel and threw it in the dirt for some other man to use. That encounter caused me to think about a lot of shit in my life.

He thinks living in the East in some fancy house makes him different from the rest of us black males, but when a white person looks at my father, all he sees is another nigga trying to play dress-up. He wanted me to escape from Hollygrove and live a lie by embracing the white-supremacist image he has hung up somewhere in his house. However, I didn't want that for myself. I didn't want to become a cold-hearted monster like him – the type who betrays his own race and ridicules a people he once lived amongst. I would have slowly but surely transformed myself into the person who has contributed to the adversity of my life: Henry.

From my freshman year up until November of 2011 of my senior year, I was a cadet in Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC.) Going into this organization, I did not have the slightest clue what I was getting myself into. I knew I wouldn't last long because I thought I wasn't "man enough" to excel in the class. In addition to this thought, a mean-ass man from Virginia would be replacing a past white Army Instructor who quit and cursed my principal out on his way out of my high school. After being constantly yelled at and ridiculed by this new army instructor, having the white guy seemed like a better option for me. "My name is Osborne Michael Reaves, and I am your new senior army instructor." I laughed aloud at his name because I thought it was old-fashioned and beyond weird. Did he laugh? No, but he did yell at me in that authoritative voice. We didn't get along for a while until I decided to attend drill practice, since I was failing.

Long story short – he and I have somehow established a strong relationship. He's no longer that mean-ass man I once loathed to be around each day at school. Honestly, I think I changed him. He told me that being strict was always a trait he was forced to demonstrate up in Virginia because you know, that's where the WHITE house is and politics were deeply embedded at his former school. In other words, he could finally be human in "The Big Easy." As he and I gradually built our relationship, I worked my hardest to move up in ranks. By the end of my sophomore year, I was named Battalion Command Sergeant Major. Once he placed that rank on my shoulders, it felt as if he finally did what my father couldn't do; I was confident that he filled my soul, Jerome.

As Battalion CMS, I was responsible for every enlisted cadet (once they entered this class, they weren't seen as students) in my battalion. When my junior year arrived, I was pissed. Nothing seemed to work. Staying after school each day. Helping cadets learn military movements and how to maneuver a rifle. Memorizing a pledge, which I have grown to disbelieve. Repeating those lines of "Yes Sir!" Nothing seemed to work. I was still empty.

Major began to chastise me, referring to me as "lazy" and "unmotivated." During this time period, I was in the midst of getting accustomed to Students at the Center, which opened my eyes to a lot of information I was previously unaware of. Before becoming a part of SAC, I didn't have a clue about anything pertaining to African American history. I learned about several black leaders and revolutionaries whom my history teachers failed to acknowledge. I even learned about the Black Panther Party, which showed me that people didn't just seek justice and equality through the anti-violence tactics Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated. Yes, I believe that Dr. King too has made a great difference, specifically in his speech on the Vietnam War, in which he talks about the military and how he was against its promotion of violence. However, I wanted to learn more, and this class accomplished that.

I gradually began to examine my surroundings each day in JROTC. I grew tired of the DAI, Director of Army Instructors, trying to persuade me to join the Army and go to West Point. "Alexander, you would make a fine cadet in the military." I thought to myself, "So, you're telling me that playing dress up, fooling with a dummy rifle, and walking stiffly proves that I can carry out orders in war?" It still amazes me how the military is able to slither its way into the walls of schools. These people are allowed to persuade us students to join the military

without the consent of our guardians. This is no different than asking someone if they want to buy weed in school.

This past summer of 2011, I spent several days hanging with my army instructor. His house was like a second home for me. I always felt welcomed and acknowledged. He treated me like a son. Returning to school and resuming my role as a cadet was a struggle for me. I realized that I hated JROTC and that he is the only reason I stayed in the class for four years. The fear of losing the only figure I ever managed to cling to began to surface. Losing him was unimaginable to me. He was the only person I felt obligated to call on that cold night my father made me feel like shit. However, the filling of my hole was just an illusion. It all began to change; he too began to make me feel like nothing.

“Guess what old man, I’m getting college credit through a Bard College Early Start program I’m enrolled in through my AP English class with Students at the Center,” I said.

“College credit,” he repeated, mockingly.

“Yes, but that’s not why I’m interested in the class.”

He laughed and began to make a fool out of me. He made fun of my ACT score, which determines how good of a college education I will receive in the future and if I’ll get a good scholarship. My score on the test isn’t high at all. My 18 falls three points lower than the national average.

“Look, I can’t get higher on the test, and if I do what does it prove? Nothing. A three-hour test can’t determine how smart I am.”

I grow tired of fussing with him because it seems as if he possesses the same traits my father does: A supporter of the white-supremacist image. He told me, “My niece is a graduate of Yale. You all (referring to us students, particularly black) should work to reach her level. Well, although you aren’t top of your class, you can do something...” I wrote a letter to him, expressing how I felt about JROTC and that I wanted him to move away from this racist mentality he has developed. You know what he told me? He said, “I agree that you should have stayed home that day instead of going to drill practice.” He too refused to understand the emptiness I feel.

Tareian King, a student in my class, and one of your supporters, Jerome, has recently won a full scholarship to Bard College. Her scholarship covers more than \$150,000. Do you know what he told her when she told him she won? “I think you should look at more places. You haven’t been to Bard – there are many places you can apply to. All you have to do is raise your ACT score up...” I couldn’t believe he said that. Tareian had to compete against over 700 students across the city for this scholarship, and just like that he brushed her accomplishment off like a light feather.

Sometimes I abruptly stop talking to him for days and weeks because of his oppressive words. Then, I always run back to him because I’m afraid of losing that figure. When he told me what transpired between him and Tareian, he told me that she stormed out of the room in anger. I asked him, “Did you even congratulate her?” He said, “No, but I think she misunderstood...” He didn’t seem to notice that I was high, so I immediately tuned him out and critically thought about what was taking place before me. I asked myself, “Do I really want someone like this in my life? No, I don’t.” I thought I did, but once again I was wrong, and here I am again, still empty as ever

I researched Angola a few days ago about a time when suicide was at its highest within the prison due to several prisoners cutting their Achilles tendons. It’s obvious that prisoners (humans) go through unimaginable amounts of pain and suffering. Yet, we humans still neglect the possibility that we are the very killing machines we are trained to fear and destroy. Being the only boy of my family has led to my isolation from certain activities and traits only exhibited by my gender counterpart. I can’t go running to dad, and my army instructor is no longer

visible to me, so I choose to run away to other things. While running in complete darkness, I run across the thought of suicide.

Besides prison, I never hear about African Americans taking their own lives. All I hear is the opposite, which has sadly affected your own life. When I get these thoughts, I become afraid. Who in the hell thinks or just imagines taking their own life? I know it may seem selfish because I know there are many people around me who love me. However, sometimes I just know. My soul tells me that it isn't enough. It wants more. It craves to be filled.

Going to a psychiatrist is just out of the damn question for me, Jerome. What are they gonna do? Give me pills that will gradually erase my sense of emotions? I decided to run to another form of therapy. A "nerd" and drugs is a parallel world to many, but many would definitely be surprised to discover that these two worlds can easily collide, especially when drugs remain so unusually accessible in black neighborhoods such as mine. To relieve these disturbing thoughts, I smoke a "joint" three to five times a month.

I never thought the pain would go this far. I feel as if I'm at the edge, and I don't have much more to live for. And yeah, I know it's stupid – that's why I'm trying to stop. The feeling of wholeness it gives me is only temporary, and once the colorful vision wears off, my reality becomes darker and incomplete.

I guess all I'm trying to say is that the only thing that appears to be keeping me alive is helping others. Wait, there's more to that. What I'm trying to say is that when I got to meet you, I actually felt worth something, you know? You told me that people such as Tareian and I are the reason that you'll never lose hope of one day being released. I didn't feel like shit anymore, and I actually felt the hole being filled. That one short encounter made me realize that there are good males, particularly African American males, who aren't like my blind father or my captive army instructor. The image that projects prisoners as monstrous beings cannot be compared to you, Jerome. A heart can be found in a prisoner. Meeting you has positively changed my perception of myself, prisoners, and the world, entirely. I hope to one day meet you in hopes that we both are free from all this oppressive shit.

Sincerely,

Wesley Alexander

DEAR WESLEY
BY JEROME MORGAN

January 29, 2012

Dear Wesley,

I'm sorry for taking this long to write you back. It's been a number of reasons that has prevented me from doing so much sooner. However, I'll get to these things later on in this letter.

So, how have you been? I hope you and your family are doing well! Your letter to me deeply touched my heart and stirred something very special within my soul! Believe me, I totally understand the emptiness you have gripping at your yearnings of freedom. In my situation, it may seem to be more of a physical matter. Nevertheless, this longing, that we both share, begins much-much deeper than the physical eye can see. First off, let me apologize on behalf of the obviously brainwashed men who have taken for granted the privilege of being held as a father, or father figure, in your life. You should take that personal experience and make a vow to yourself to never be as non-supporting as they were to you! I'll be honored to be considered as someone who can and will

uphold your standards. We actually need each other more than we know. Our hearts are in a just place, and our minds long to exert our souls' demands. Let's get at it, son...

I also wanna say that I can relate to your attempts to relieve the suffering of being entirely misunderstood. However, we must not submit ourselves to these superficial indulgences! They do much more harm than help in the long run. We both have a whole world of responsibilities to attend to in our future. Many people are depending on our spirits to communicate God's power into theirs by our prevailing efforts. I'll be the first to say that you have been a beacon of light in my predicament of hopelessness. Your life is an inspiration to my own. You and Tareian have long begun your legacies in my book. You have set a mark on my life, and I pray you both continue to do so for the more who really need for you to fulfill God's purpose for your life. The world of superficial hearts wants us to believe that a life attuned to genuineness of our beings is a very dull life to live. Nevertheless, I find great joy, and experience an authentic happiness, in being all that I desire for others to be to me and our people! We have to be fun-loving and serious about affording the world with hope, justice, and peace!

Well, getting back to those reasons why this response has been so delayed. The biggest thing that has been demanding my time is the recent change in my job assignment here in Angola. I'm now a cellblock barber, which means I work in the cellblocks and shave and cut all the guys' hair there, from seven in the morning 'til five that evening, Monday thru Saturday, and sometimes on Sunday. Not to add that I also cut hair on my own time to provide for my daily necessities. Yes, I do aspire to continue being a barber even after my exoneration. For the most part, immediately following my release, I expect that this skill will allow me to earn an honest living, and eventually afford me with financial security once I'm licensed to do so. Therefore, I view my prison job fulfillment as preparation for what lies ahead once I regain my freedom. I've even mapped it all out on paper, and mailed it to my future wife to be revised.

Okay, I don't wanna hold up this letter any longer. Although I can write plenty more. That's yet another reason why I couldn't get to writing this letter any sooner. I knew I needed space to not short-change you on any of my thoughts. I feel that I can honestly run it with you all day long. So, please know, even though this letter has to end, my thoughts of you continue. Take care, stay in touch, keep a humble head, and tenacious heart...

Summum Bonum,

Jerome

ANGOLA AND KATRINA BY JEROME MORGAN

Angola, 2012

On that very tragic morning of August 29, 2005, I was in prison at Angola, when I walked into the TV room of Camp C Bear #4 dormitory, brushing my teeth, when I joined several other guys in total shock at the terrifying news that CNN correspondent Anderson Cooper was reporting about Hurricane Katrina tearing through my hometown of New Orleans. His face was so somber, as his voice trailed behind the footage of the infested gray waters that breached through the levee protection and swallowed what was said to be 80% of the city, rising to 8 feet in some of the same areas I grew up in before being arrested in 1993, and where beaucoup of my family and friends still lived.

I and every other prisoner from the city of New Orleans who were witnessing this dreadful newscast felt our very being well up with such grief and despair. We watched in disbelief as people in our communities were

being airlifted from rooftops by helicopters: babies, the elderly, people breaking through the roof of their attics, begging to be brought to shelter; dead bodies just floating by in the flood waters as others who were alive made their way through the shallow parts in a deeply distressed search for rescue. People were stranded on bridges, waving their arms to the helicopters that passed those who managed to survive.

The TV room remained eerily silent except for the occasional, “That’s my auntie!” or “That’s in the East,” whenever one of the prisoners would recognize an area or the people being displayed on the gut-wrenching news coverage. Some guys had to pull themselves away from the TV to better deal with all the obvious questions in their minds. Who?? What? When? Where? How? Why?? Thousands upon thousands of people were being reported dead. Hospitals, nursing homes, even buried bodies being washed up out of the grave as if their death wasn’t enough.

My heart was literally pounding away in my chest, not knowing what could be expected next, just as the news began to cover the horrific events taking place at the Convention Center and the Superdome. People were dying of dehydration, no drinking water, no food, reports of rape, the looting, some people not realizing the seriousness of the situation, or choosing to take advantage of the situation by heightening the madness, the community and police alike. Total chaos! It seemed to be a city-wide civil war going on right in the midst of this natural disaster. Tanks, army jeeps, helicopters and military units seemed to be swarming everywhere in the CBD (Central Business District). Families were being separated by evacuation buses that initially boarded the most needy and would return for the rest. The reports of violence, neglect, and abandonment were so excruciating to all the affected viewers. You could actually feel the tension mount as the news coverage displayed images of mostly black communities in a total state of panic, as on-scene reporters referred to them as refugees, as if they didn’t belong to the American community at all.

The television remained on CNN for days, if not weeks. Whatever amount of days it was, felt to me like one very long day that just didn’t want to end. A few guys stayed put in the TV room with their attention sternly affixed to the developing news without ever even considering one wink of sleep. The dorm held 64 prisoners with only one TV. Eventually, other prisoners from other areas around the state or elsewhere wished to be watching the regular programs again. This caused offense to quite a few prisoners from New Orleans and resulted in arguments that quickly escalated into fist fights. Quite naturally, there was a great sense of desperation within all of us who had family and friends living in those affected areas, and we were so very eager to hear any news that would indicate that our people were alive!

Initially, the Angola administration had no answers to bring calm to the growing frustrations. The phone lines in the city were down, and New Orleans area post offices were inoperative. Some of the more considerate prisoners who had family and friends in unaffected areas that they could call collect offered to try and contact some of the family and friends of the prisoners from the city. These very kind efforts urged the Angola administration to set up “link lines” in each security office on every unit for us to use to try and contact our loved ones free of charge. Within days, Angola also became a shelter for New Orleans area parish prisoners with funds allocated by FEMA and other recovery organizations.

At the time, I was in steady contact with a female friend named Shanika, who lived in LaPlace, an area not at all affected by Katrina. Therefore, after not being able to contact any of my family members directly, I would utilize the “link lines” to call her and get updated concerning my sister and nephews, my son, my niece, my mom, my cousins, my aunt, any IPNO office members, and Mrs. McWilliams, a lady I quite dearly consider as family because she has kept in contact with me since I have been in Angola. She was the foster mother of my deceased brother and also continued to support his 13 year old daughter, my only niece.

The very first person I remember hearing from after Katrina was Mrs. McWilliams. She contacted me September 3rd, 2005, letting me know that she was okay, after deciding to leave her home in New Orleans East at 3:30

AM Sunday, to evacuate to her daughter's home in Gonzales. She also informed me that her other family made it out okay, but she wasn't so sure about my niece, Kenisha, and her family, because she hadn't heard from them. In her letter, she also conveyed some of the same images from the CNN news reports and expressed her suspicions about the breaches to the levees and the resentment she felt towards Washington for being so slow with sending help to the city. So, we continued to correspond through letters and would update one another on any and all information we could find on any of the others.

The very next person to contact me was my mother. For the most part, one would think that this shouldn't be strange. However, before Katrina, I hadn't heard from my mom since 1997! Back then, she was serving time in St. Gabriel, and the woman's prison would afford them a trip to Angola twice a year to visit any immediate relatives. We visited once, and she was released that same year. This time I received a correspondence from her expressing motherly sentiments, while also informing me that she was in the parish jail when the hurricane hit, and that they were evacuated to Angola. She also made note to ask if I had any information on any of our family. Excited to be contacted by my mother, despite the lapse of time, I immediately brought her letter to the attention of the security supervisor over the camp and asked that he allow me to be transported to Camp F, where my mother was being sheltered, so that I could visit with her. My request was granted, and I, along with a few others who had immediate relatives being sheltered at Camp F, was transported there almost twice a month. I was also allowed to provide her with any necessities that she needed. Shanika was even kind enough to mail money to her account so that she could afford to purchase the feminine products that I couldn't possibly provide. We really made the most of these visits in our reconciliation as mother and son, until Angola transferred her to a Simmesport area jail, where she was soon released. However, we have never lost touch with each other ever since.

The very first time I received any signs of life concerning my sister and her sons was through a November 22, 2005 letter from Shanika, telling me that she received information on-line that Belinda was located in Virginia. She called the number and left a message. On December 4, 2005, I received a letter from Shanika telling me that she had finally talked to my sister on her birthday, November 30th. She said that my sister expressed disbelief that Shanika had actually tried to track her down and was surprised to hear her voice on her voicemail. She said that my sister was eager to know how I was doing and even told Shanika that she couldn't think of where in the world our mother could be. So Shanika informed her that our mother was doing fine and explained that whole situation to her. Also in Shanika's letter, she told me how my sister expressed how lonely and depressed she had gotten until speaking to Shanika, and that surely now she and my nephews were okay. I then urgently called Shanika on the "link line" and got my sister's number so that I could speak with her myself. The next day, I was finally able to hear my sister's voice and talk with my nephews. They told me that they rode the storm out at home, and there was not significant damage to their home. But they were made to evacuate under the state-of-emergency and ended up on the Claiborne Bridge, before being taken to Virginia. We kept updated with one another and later gathered information on my cousins and aunt who evacuated to our cousin's home in St. Louis. In September, 2007, Shanika quite pleasantly surprised me with a visit, accompanied by my sister and nephews. That was the first time I saw them since Katrina.

Through a letter on June 18, 2006, Mrs. McWilliams informed me that she had found my niece, Kenisha, and was able to talk with her the night before. Kenisha was located in Houston, after she and her maternal aunt were rescued from the roof of her aunt's France Street residence, four whole days after the storm. She said that Kenisha asked about me and wanted to know if I had been released from jail. Mrs. McWilliams also provided me with Kenisha's address, and, of course, I took the privilege of writing to her, which began our very first moments of getting to know one another.

I had gotten IPNO's contact information in September, 2005, from another client of theirs, whose case was being represented by them in court at that time. Of course, the proceedings were momentarily stalled due to

the catastrophe left by Hurricane Katrina in all matters of life and liberty in New Orleans. However, I wrote to them at a temporary address in Jackson, MS. Everyone was devastated, but doing fine. Most of the staff were scattered about in different locations across the country, such as LA, Houston, Milwaukee, and Oregon. They extended their thoughts and prayers to me and my family, assuring me that they would continue to keep in touch and update me on any progress gathering resources and figuring out where to go from here. The office on Baronne Street had survived the flood waters, so everyone's files were still intact. Indeed, I was very much relieved to know that no one at IPNO suffered any major loss. I had really developed a genuine relationship with them over the years. However, the situation seemed so much more daunting now, as I imagined them being even more under-staffed and under-funded due to Katrina's aftermath. Not to mention, court buildings, records offices, and evidence rooms being in ruin! In addition to the 80 plus individuals listed in the police reports who so desperately needed to be interviewed, now they were probably displaced to who knows where, if they were still alive! Nevertheless, IPNO's investigation into my case picked up again in October, 2006 with the help of Ebony being added to the office as the staff investigator and primarily assigned to my case, which eventually led to matters being handed over to Mosi in 2010, when Ebony left to pursue her master's in sociology. Now I am currently on the verge of exoneration due to a total team effort of so many individuals in and outside of the IPNO office.

To this very day, I still have not heard one single word from my son or his mom. IPNO had done on-line searches in early and late 2007, which provided invalid information. A Baton Rouge based Harmony Outreach Program also conducted meetings in 2007 with prisoners in Angola, who still had not been successful in contacting loved ones since the storm. Their efforts also came up empty. I've written to his mom's pre-Katrina address, only to have the letters returned to sender on three different occasions over the years. If not for a cousin of my son's mom, who keeps in contact with a guy in Angola, telling him that Tamika is living out of state, I wouldn't know what to think at all. My search continues.

The turmoil still rages inside of me, as I remain affected by Katrina due to my on-going pursuit to be reconnected with my son. I do feel hopeful, because so many of my other relationships with my family and the progress of my case have been much improved over what they were before Katrina. Nevertheless, being in Angola through the havoc of that particular time and its resulting effect have caused me to feel even more helpless than I was before. Katrina claimed the lives of so many loved ones of a lot of guys in Angola, who weren't in any position to do anything but watch and wait, only to find out the one thing they feared most. I won't even pretend to imagine what it must have felt like to be deep in the center of such wretchedness. Nonetheless, being physically in bondage at Angola, and having your very soul dwell in the suspenseful moments of Katrina, was and remains a hurt that time still might fail to heal.

MY WHOLE LIFE

BY JA'MEL MORGAN

2012

My whole life my uncle, Jerome Morgan, has been in prison. I've never known what was the reason for him being in there. The only thing they told me was he's in prison for something that he didn't even do. I'm seventeen years old and my uncle has been in there for eighteen years and he doesn't deserve to be where he is. It's not fair that all these years nobody has tried their hardest to get him out of that place, until recently.

My uncle is a very talented person and I love him a lot. He has taught me a lot, even though he has spent mostly his whole life in a cell. He didn't even see my big brother, who is nineteen, graduate, and I know that hurt him very much. I hope he gets out of prison before I graduate, and I know he will be very proud of me.

My whole life I have wondered when he will ever get out, and I just can't wait until he does. That day, when he comes home, I know I'm going to cry, because he didn't deserve all these years to spend somewhere and not even have a life. Jerome Morgan is a very special person; I just wish he was home.

I finally heard the story about why he is in there, and it is so obvious that he didn't even do it, but everyone knows that the judge never wants to be wrong. We just have to fight and pray and know my Uncle Jerome is coming home. I truly can't wait for that day to arrive, and to see him in a better place. So everyone who wants him home, let's keep writing him and keep his head up. He loves the letters that everybody sends him.

When Uncle Jerome comes to my mind, I know that he is thinking about my mother, brother, and me. We all love him, and our family is just waiting for him, so we can feel him in our presence. This is something my brother and I have not ever experienced, but that first time will be very special to us. Even though he was in prison for seventeen years of our lives, he is the best uncle ever to my brother and to me.

TAREIAN AND WESLEY

BY JEROME MORGAN

Angola, July 2012

"I am writing you because I am not sure if you have received my letter or not. I have been having some difficulties trying to send my letters to you on numerous occasions. A lot has been going on in my life, and I constantly feel as if you are the only person I can talk to. Although you are miles from me, locked away for a crime you and I know you did not commit, I'm always wondering how you're doing, Jerome. If you didn't get my last letter, I am willing to write it over. I discussed my dream of one day being a barber like you, my relationship with my mother, and how I still impatiently wait for the day you are finally released from prison. Oh, and most of all, I discussed how I was deeply impacted by your willingness to be a father to me; it means a lot." — Wesley Alexander to Jerome Morgan

"I don't think you could ever possibly know how much you mean to me, and how much I appreciate you. You teach me things that no one else can, because they don't know. You have created this space where I can be honest with you, which allows me to be honest to myself, which is something I have never practiced. You are so intelligent and filled with wisdom. I never want the letters to end because I learn so much from communicating with you. My relationship with my father hasn't been true for a long time. We stopped talking for three years once, and now we're not speaking again and it's okay. I guess the show was due to be over." — Tareian King to Jerome Morgan

I am a prisoner at Angola, sentenced to life for a murder of which I am totally innocent. Still to this day, I'm not sure who my father was, or who my father is, but I'm certain that I am not him. My mother has always told me that a guy named Anderson Ross was my father. However, my last name indicates that the guy my mother is still legally married to, but long ago separated from, may very well be my father instead.

Some might ask, how I have the nerve to question my mother's words on such a matter. Well, I do have my reasons, some of which I'll try my best to explain. However, for the most part, now being a grown man, I can understand that there's so much more that my mom can't quite bear to share with me concerning her physically, mentally, and emotionally turbulent times of childhood, marriage, and giving birth. My mom grew up

without receiving any formal education whatsoever, was married at the age of sixteen, and her first child was stillborn, before later giving birth to my brother, Harry, at the age of twenty-one, me at the age of twenty-three, and my sister, whom she named after herself, at the age of twenty-five, only to later give us all over to foster care, when we were toddlers, so that her own inadequacies wouldn't impede upon her hopes of us being properly raised and educated.

My mother's life is a puzzling story to say the least. I'm not certain exactly why she never received a school education, or why she was married so young, exactly when she separated from her husband, or when she began her relationship with Anderson Ross. This is because I have never met her husband, although I did get the opportunity to meet Anderson around the time I made seventeen. Back then, my mother was incarcerated for allegedly killing an abusive boyfriend, and Anderson was just being released from Angola for an armed robbery sentence he had been serving all of my life. Somehow, he contacted my brother after his release, and my brother helped him to get in touch with me.

At the time, I was staying with my mom's aunt on Annette Street, and Anderson was living with his wife in New Orleans East. He reached me by phone to ask if he could come over and pick me up. I didn't have a problem with that, so I put him on hold to first get consent from my aunt. To my surprise, she expressed a rather strong disapproval due to what she told me was a very troublesome relationship that he had with my mom before his incarceration. However, my aunt was still considerate enough to suggest that if I indeed had my own desire to meet him, I could just tell him that I would be waiting at a nearby gas station on Elysian Fields. I then returned to the phone to relay these stipulations to Anderson. He happily agreed, and assured me that he was on his way as soon as we ended the call.

Of course, my mind wondered about this mysterious man that my mom had always acknowledged as my father. Albeit, my heart was quite the contrary, due to all the years I had lived without both my parents' presence up to that particular point. My sentiment concerning the whole situation was rather unexpecting of anything at all. In my mind, I began to think that this was more about him getting the chance to meet me instead of me having the chance to meet him. As far as I was concerned, the times I needed him most had passed. I wouldn't say I was bitter towards him in any way for being absent, because I know all too well the misfortunes of the poor and the realities that result. Therefore, I gave him and my mother the benefit of the doubt that those hardships were just as much to blame for me never having their presence to depend on. Some might say this is nothing but a child being in denial, and just simply making excuses to better cope with the pain. However, others might say this is a child mature beyond his years, to be so considerate of what the circumstances may be that contributed to this loss.

Anderson pulled into the gas station, accompanied by my brother, in a relatively brand new red Ford Probe. We greeted sort of placidly as I got in the back seat. He then drove to a check cashing place on Canal Street so my brother could cash the check he had received from his job. We just rode around the city a bit, as I mostly kept silent except to answer questions he would ask about me and my sister, who had just given birth to her very first child. The majority of the time, I just listened to how excited my brother seemed to be, while conversing with him, as he drove us to his wife's residence in the East. Anderson and his wife were married while he was in prison. We were all introduced, and she introduced us to her son who was fathered by another man. Her son was between me and my brother's ages and had his own used car. So us three decided to hop in his ride and stop by my brother's girlfriend for most of the day.

When Anderson finally brought me back to the gas station on Elysian Fields later on that night, he first stopped by his mom's apartment, in an apartment complex directly across the street from the gas station. He introduced me and my brother to her, as she hugged and kissed us both with grandmotherly affection. But, to tell you the God-honest truth, I didn't quite feel any type of innate connection to this guy, Anderson. From that

day on, I only saw him on one other occasion, before I was arrested. And later, while I was in Angola, my brother revealed to me that when Anderson got news of my arrest, he made a very sarcastic comment to my brother, saying, "Shit, he could've let me get that reward money for his arrest." Now I definitely had something to feel bitter towards him about! I certainly couldn't understand why a father would make such a comment about his very own son's arrest. Especially, due to the fact that I am actually innocent of the crime I was arrested for. Unfortunately, not long thereafter, Anderson was murdered. Angola didn't allow me to attend his funeral, but I was mailed a copy of his obituary, which listed me, my brother, and my sister as his children, among other children he had as well.

During my first couple of years in Angola, I ran across two guys, also from New Orleans, who were a few years older than I was, and also brothers to each other. As I became acquainted with them, we discovered that they were actually nephews of my mother's husband. Once we came to realize this, their very first response was, "Man, you do look just like him!" Of course, I was very embarrassed by the whole situation. Not being raised by my own family, being in prison for something I didn't do, not knowing for sure who my daddy is, and never even meeting the guy my mother was once married to! I would later meet the mom, father, and older sisters, who were my mom's sister-in-law, brother-in-law, and nieces, during a visitation, while I was sharing a visit from my own sister, and they all expressed this very same sentiment about my resemblance to my mom's husband. No, nothing further ever came about after us making these connections. From what I did gather, my mother's husband was a terribly ill man, suffering from alcohol-related health issues. Of course, I expressed my sincere concerns, although I was indeed careful not to push too hard and only end up being disappointed again by any sense of disinterest or whatever on his part.

The vacancy I've felt not having any kind of relationship with whomever my father was or is, resulted in me very intently putting forth my own unceasing efforts to reach out to my ex-girlfriend's son, who she and her family have always claimed to be born of my seed, six months after my arrest. I would never want him to ever consider me to be anything close to what my father was or is. Nevertheless, being in such a situation like mine, it seemed less of a question concerning my love and desire to have a presence in his life, and more of a question about his mother being able to deal with the situation without it having an adverse effect on the attitude of our growing child's outlook on life. Eventually, I succeeded in convincing her to finally grant us the opportunity to meet. He was almost ten years of age at that point, and I'm so pleased to say that we instantly bonded upon the very first moment that we met! Unfortunately, due to the tragic events caused by Hurricane Katrina, we've been out of touch ever since. However, I'm always hoping that in his heart, my presence as his father still permanently exists until we are somehow reconnected.

"My mother knows that you are a good person. I do not have to explain to her why I felt the need to write to you. I feel as though I'm beginning to rant if I go on any longer. Well, those are just some of the things that have been going on in my life lately. I graduate next month. I'm excited. I honestly hate school. I don't have a clue what I plan to pursue in college. I'm gonna major in English though. I'm leaning towards a career in law, but being in that environment is depressing. Yet, I want to be able to help people who are in similar conditions as you. Then again, I want to be a teacher, but they are wrongfully underpaid and the education system is considered "dead" by many. While in college, I'll still continue writing you. Don't ever doubt that. This is not something temporary to me. I really do care. I care so much that I anticipate your release from prison more than my graduation or my first year in college. My vision of life is unconventional. Money does not give me life. I do not define success by one's salary. Your release would be my success. Your humanity means more to me than the bullshit this society projects. After the shit that happened lately, I noticed that it is easy to lose hope. I'm not gonna give up on myself, nor will I give up believing that you will be free, Jerome. Until then, I'll keep on living." — Wesley Alexander

“I thank you for not judging me, and always being here for me, mentally and in spirit. I appreciate you for guiding me through my trials and errors and not leaving me in them. I’m crying my heart out, because all I ever wanted was a relationship like ours. I’m so thankful for having you in my life. I know I disappoint you at times, but there’s never a time where I think you’re going to stop talking to me. Our relationship is everything I pretended to have with him and so much more. I know for a fact you love me unconditionally, you have proven it, by still being in my life. I don’t have to pretend with you, I can be open and really truly honestly talk to you about anything. I don’t have to hold anything in or be ashamed; I can be myself and that means so much to me. I have lost him permanently, but it doesn’t hurt as much because I have someone who he has failed to be. A father.” — Tareian King

Early Thursday morning, December 1, 2011, I was being transported by Angola Prison to the Criminal Court Building in New Orleans for purposes of a second court date to continue matters pertaining to new evidence that was recently discovered in support of my innocence. Just as the transportation unit I was riding in approached the intersection of Tulane Avenue and South Broad Street and slowly made a right hand turn at the traffic light, I noticed two teenage students, female and male, jogging across the intersection together, making sure to keep up with each other, and rather hurriedly walking across the courthouse lawn and hastening up the concrete steps into the courthouse. I thought this to be sort of peculiar, because they were wearing the exact same type of school uniforms that were worn by one group of public school students who attended my very first court appearance not even a month ago. This caused me to ask myself if they could very well be here in my interest once again?

Oh, yes, it certainly mattered very much to me, because during my first court appearance, I had experienced a very unforgettable moment of being much more strengthened by the empowering presence of those high school teenagers who showed such great interest in my life and cared so deeply about seeing me exonerated. Their support moved me in a way that a child is expecting of their parents to do what is necessary, to overcome troubles and provide them with their example of encouragement, so they would know how to do the same as they encounter their own difficulties. Every last one of these children had to be the same age as my own child, or very close to it. I was to testify that day, and although I was extremely nervous before they arrived, I was not any longer, because I just couldn’t see myself letting them down. I had to give the hope that they expected.

At that first court appearance on an early Monday morning, November 14, 2011, I also received quite a few letters from these children, which I very eagerly read during the two hour drive back to Angola from the courthouse that day. No doubt, I appreciated them all! However, two of these letters have remained in my mind and heart to this very day.

Dear Jerome,

My name is Tareian and I attend Eleanor McMMain High School. I can only imagine how it feels to be wrongfully incarcerated, because I know how it feels to be wrongfully accused...

Dear Jerome,

My name is Wesley Alexander. I’m 17 years old and I’m a senior in high school. One significant aspect about me that we both share in common is that I too am a black male. Upon reading a couple of letters you’ve written, I learned how relationships can easily be estranged due to the cruel doings of the criminal justice system...

After the closing of my December 1st, 2011, court appearance, the judge was kind enough to grant me a 15 minute visit with each of the people who were there in support of me, two at a time. First, I visited with Judy Demarest and my nineteen-year-old niece, Kenisha, both of whom I was meeting in person for the first time. Second, it was my cousin, Shontil, and her husband, Dwayne. And last, my investigator brought in Tareian and

Wesley, the very same two students rushing to the courthouse that morning, who both had the audacity to be cutting class to be there. I also later found that they both had spent the week, stopping at no end, in their determined efforts to get the opportunity to give the judge a very well-thought-out, typed letter from each of them urging him to judge the many in-depth reasons they believed he should rule to have the new evidence admitted and argued on its merits.

As one should expect, I was so deeply touched by the undying efforts of these graciously courageous and compassionate kids. They took such an enormous interest in my life, sacrificing their time at school to give support to my freedom. Of course, I got on them about ducking out on class, but how could I not understand what their hearts were saying?

From that point forward, we kept in touch through writing countless letters to one another, and I began to know more about them and learn that their fathers were inexcusably so absent from their lives, and how they have gradually come to find that father figure in me, which they were so undeservingly missing all of their lives. Of course, I could definitely relate to the missing father feeling more than they knew. Therefore, I really felt so deeply blessed that I could be considered as such by both these beautiful kids, despite me not being there at the moment physically. For Father's Day, 2012, they each mailed me a card, in which they eloquently wrote:

Jerome, You've helped me live through many days, giving me the support and emotional strength I needed. I never want our bond to be broken. Ever since you acknowledged me as a son to you, I realized that I truly mean something to you. I hope that this card will get you through your darkest days as well. We both must stay strong. Thanks – for all you've done, for all you do, and for being the person you are.

Happy Father's Day,

Wesley

Happy Father's Day Jerome!

It's amazing how everything played out. I walked into communicating with you out of interest in criminal justice and look where we are now. You're the father I never had. I can talk to you about anything and everything and be completely honest. I can express myself to you without you turning your back on me. I appreciate you taking the time out to write and guide me through life. I thank you for being the "someone" in my life I always wished for. I thank you for not letting being incarcerated keep you down and not limiting you to reach out to people – students like me and Wesley. I don't think you would ever understand how much your presence in my life means to me. Although you're not here physically, it don't stop or affect anything. I'm happy we were able to bond and build a strong relationship. We are the perfect example of how money isn't everything. Money doesn't make someone a father. Time, support, comfort, guidance, and dedication is what makes you the father you are to me and I thank you!

Tareian

Appropriately so, in such a moment in our lives, those cards from Tareian and Wesley were the only Father's Day greetings I received this year. From the very two children who have so proudly adopted me as the father they never had. Although I do fully relate to the odds against being all that a father should be in such a repressive system of government on all fronts here in America, especially Louisiana. Nevertheless, our children are at least deserving of a father's unyielding interest in all the years of their lives. Whoever each of our fathers were, or whoever our fathers are, I'm so grateful for them helping me to be the father that I am and the father that Tareian and Wesley need me to be. And I always wonder what my other son is thinking of how very much of a father he has yet to see?

Our children are the very reason so many who are incarcerated truly need to be rehabilitated and free!!!

PATERNAL LOVE

BY WESLEY ALEXANDER

I knew it. I knew it would happen. I knew this barrier I consciously constructed would crumble over time. After all, I am vulnerable to love, especially a type of love, which is unknown to me. A love between a father and son: paternal love.

I feel so connected to Jerome now. I cannot imagine being unable to communicate with him. I need to be aware of his condition in Angola, or I'll begin to worry. Sometimes I picture myself, sitting alone helplessly engulfed by my thoughts and fears of what may have possibly happened to him. The stories I hear of Angola told by prisoners and visitors alike are excruciating to imagine. Stories of Jerome are brought to life. I can feel the tight fist in my stomach as he resists the one meal of squash per day. Stare into the cold eyes of the prison guard in complete shock when rejected of his pleading request for water. Ignore the five week pain of sleeping on the cell floor out of sympathy for his prison mate, suffering from cancer who needed a bed more than him. His experiences are inevitably relived by me. My eyes are no longer young. I have seen the outcome of cruelty and torment enforced in the prison system.

Jerome has gradually become a part of me. As extraordinary as it may seem, I believe that we have spiritually bonded. Although we are miles apart, his life emerges into my own. I silently cringe each time I attempt to digest updates on his survival in Angola. My relationship with Jerome is personal, almost sacred. But I have to know that Jerome is safe. I must know that he is still fighting. Knowing that he has yet to give up on his life is a reason I keep living. He is an inspiration, mentor, brother, and father to me. Losing him to this corrupt criminal justice system is not something I dare to imagine anytime soon. The thought alone seems fatal. As a result, I destroyed the barrier I once crafted around my body. Even when Jerome cautioned me not to be overwhelmed by negative events and situations that may affect him in Angola, I had to destroy it, because I grew to love Jerome. I voluntarily decided to overwhelm myself. I do not want him to ever withhold his experiences from me. He is not alone. A son is willing to endure the hardships of being a prisoner with him.

One may ask me, "How have you grown to love a prisoner?" The process was quite long, but truly valuable. My name is Wesley Denzel Henry Alexander. I was named "Wesley," after the actor, Wesley Snipes: a former celebrity crush of my mother (probably until he was incarcerated.) I was named, "Denzel," after Denzel Washington by my aunt, who begged my mother to name me after the handsome actor. I was named "Henry" after my biological father, a man I barely know. Lastly, I was named "Alexander" after my mother's ex-husband, who agreed to sign my birth certificate during my father's absence. I carry the names of men I cannot connect to, besides the vivid fact that we are all black. I do not care about their wealth, fame, looks, nor status. None of it correlates with me. I was raised as no man's son, consequently bearing the names of total strangers. Being isolated from the guidance of males contributed to my psychological imprisonment. The contributions of the women of my family toward my growth were limited. Unsuccessful attempts of assuming the masculine role of their gender counterpart reiterated that I will always be different from them.

Living in a female-dominated household encouraged me to seek a male influence outside my home. In high school I joined JROTC expecting that it would bring out the "man" in me as every smiling recruiter confidently said it would. After being prone to every bully's wrath as a shy, quiet boy who barely spoke above a whisper, I wanted to change. I wanted to change because I wanted to prove to people that I did not need a father to become a man. I raised myself to not trust any male figures who may present themselves in my life. I was tired of being lied to, mistreated, abandoned. I'll never forget those days I waited on my father to arrive. He never came. I became convinced I could not have a father. Many of my friends were without fathers as well. I was not

alone, but I felt so. I rarely spoke to anyone when I was younger. No one appeared to be enduring the pain of loss as heavily as I was. My suffering was somehow unnoticed.

As a freshman in high school, my senior army instructor quickly took me under his wing. He and I were nothing alike. Actually, at times he was quite intimidating. I remember my first time wearing that green uniform. One of my friends told me that wearing a black tie was not mandatory, but I figured that it would look nicely on me, so I stayed up all night, teaching myself how to tie one.

“Class attention,” yelled my senior army instructor.

Everyone stood up at once. Feet spread forty degrees apart. Hands cuffed. Arms to our side. Chin up. Eyes forward. Our stances were identical to each other. The classroom full of fourteen year old kids was remarkably silent. While observing the classroom using my peripheral vision, I noticed him walking towards me.

“What did I do?” I wondered, frantically.

His skin was a light complexion, which made me question if he was white or black. His short, blackish gray hair gave him away though. I realized that somehow he was indeed black. His voice sounded unusual to me, but then I remembered that he was from Virginia. He walked so stiffly that he seemed to believe that he was still in the army, marching amongst his comrades. His eyes caught my full attention – they were focused on me. Now, he was less than two feet away from where I stood still.

He eyed me down for about a good two minutes or so. I knew he was conducting his own inspection of me. His face was emotionless as he observed me from several angles. I couldn’t read him at all. After he finished examining my uniform he took a step back and faced the rest of the cadets.

“Class, take a look at Alexander. This is how you are supposed to wear a class B uniform!”

I didn’t realize that I was holding my breath until he walked away and ordered us to take our seats. Publicly receiving praise was unusual to me, especially from a man. Honestly, I enjoyed the brief moment. I enjoyed it because I never experienced it before. As a result, I immediately grew vulnerable to him. He taught me everything I needed to know to prosper in JROTC as a cadet. The tone of my loud voice was nothing like the soft voice I previously owned; it could be heard at every drill meet I competed in. My proper bearing was used as a model other cadets should envy. Every drop of sweat during physical training made me stronger. Most of all, the pretend rank on my shoulders made me feel as if I was truly a man – a soldier. My Senior Army Instructor was pleased with my rate of progress. After years of feeling alone, being in his presence had an unexpected effect on me. Putting a smile on my instructor’s face suddenly turned into a daily mission I worked to accomplish.

“I’m thinking about joining the army, Major.”

“Oh, you are? That’s good son. You’ll do fine in the army.”

I did not understand why I told my SAI that I was interested in the military. It slipped out of nowhere. There were times when I came home after rifle practice and stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror for more than fifteen minutes. The dummy rifle I held transformed into the real thing and my clothes were plastered with camouflage. This was my reflection, staring at me with his dark eyes. I was frightened. It was then I realized that I was wrong. I did not intend to live the life of a soldier, at all. Even if that meant I would once again be left without a father. I knew what I truly desired. However, I was afraid that confronting my SAI about my inner emotions would signal that I was the weak little boy I used to be. Instead, I slowly began to weaken, emotionally. I sunk into a state of depression stronger than I had ever experienced before. Not only was I

coping with the stress of choosing the right college or finishing up high school. I constantly clashed with my SAI. He could not accept that the obedient child he had taken under his wing refused to be a cadet.

During my junior year in high school, I was heavily involved in my AP English class, which was taught by two educators, Jim Randels and Kalamu ya Salaam, who are also the founders of Students at the Center. Students at the Center (SAC) is a program, which allows students to enroll in advanced courses in English and history. I was fascinated with SAC because I witnessed the dynamic force it could have in my English class. I studied the work of black revolutionaries, black writers, black poets, black civil rights leaders. Basically, I was finally exposed to black history. My intelligence reached levels of understanding an ordinary class could not achieve. Analyzing literature awarded me the ability to analyze my life as well. Several family members and my senior army instructor viewed me as a rebel because of my sudden rejection of traditional thoughts and ideas. One of my rejections included the negative perspective of a prisoner many Americans have ignorantly adopted.

The environment of my English class was totally different from JROTC. Because of this, I decided to remain in the distinct environment as a senior as well. I wasn't obligated to follow orders, walk stiffly, or refer to my friends by their last names. Being in my English class enabled me to be myself without being ashamed or feeling imprisoned. While I was in the midst of my battles with my SAI, I was actively involved in the Jerome Morgan case I was exposed to in my English class. Freedom is a characteristic a man who proclaims to be innocent was stripped of days before my birth. He was seventeen years old when the shooting took place. He was invited to attend a young lady's Sweet Sixteen birthday party. Most likely expecting to have some innocent fun, Jerome Morgan found himself charged with murdering someone. Jerome hid under the disc jockey's table when shots were fired from the entrance of the room where the party was held. Yet, he was accused of firing the bullets he fled from. I could not understand how Jerome was linked to the murder. He even assisted a wounded victim until the paramedics arrived. This is clearly not an act of a murderer, all because his clothing and skin color got him confused with the actual shooter.

After listening to Jerome's letter to SAC, "From the River to the Lake," I was infuriated because if someone such as Jerome, who was just like me, young, black, and seventeen could be imprisoned by inaccurate information used against him, I can easily end up in prison as well. Jerome's letter inspired me to learn more about the events that led to his incarceration. By this time, receiving promotions, awards, ribbons, and other accolades no longer fazed me. I stopped leading drill competitions. I didn't take pride in wearing my uniform. I forgot that I was the newly promoted Battalion Commander (a decision, which was against my own will.) I found myself gaining interest in things outside JROTC.

I was overly excited when my classmates and I were given the opportunity to attend one of Jerome Morgan's hearings. I wanted to finally meet the man who proclaimed to be innocent. During the bus ride to the courthouse I tried to mold an image of Jerome Morgan, but the negative images of prisoners projected by society only came to mind (mug shots of ruthless men behind bars.) After walking through those double doors and settling in the court room, I waited impatiently along with the other students to witness Jerome Morgan fight for his innocence. Although this was my first time sitting in a courtroom, I watched eagerly and closely as everything took place around me. Before Jerome's case was presented to the judge, I glanced around the courtroom to spot where he could be, and I suddenly heard someone call his name, just a few benches ahead of me. It appeared to be his attorney conversing with him whose back was towards me and the others who defended him faithfully no matter how the trial had gone.

When Jerome's case was presented and he was called to speak, I couldn't get a good glance at him because a man who began immediately interrogating him stood in front of the little view I had. I asked myself, "Why is he yelling at Jerome?" I was astonished that Jerome reacted so calmly after suffering from constant brutality, verbally and physically, for eighteen years. I was afraid that he was now emotionless and lost the feeling of

happiness similarly to my army instructor. I was definitely aware due to Jerome being incarcerated for many years that his incarceration heavily influenced his current mindset. But during the trial break, I got a chance to share eye contact with Jerome. During this short moment, I noticed that he was smiling at each and every one of us students. I was amazed that he was able to retain his humanity through the process of dehumanization we humans know as prison. It soothes my soul to know that through it all, his feelings of hope and happiness still exist and were illustrated by his enlightening smile.

Jerome is no doubt a human being, and I was moved to continue supporting him. One of my dearest friends, Tareian King, who was equally interested in the Jerome Morgan case, accompanied me in missing school to attend his second hearing. Before Jerome was called to speak, a policeman's case was still in session. He appeared to have accused a young man of selling drugs. The young man's lawyer defended his client by asking the policeman how was he able to see a drug exchange from a far distance. In addition, he also asked him how could he see what was being exchanged. The policeman was a black man, and so was the young man whom he accused based on suspicion. The expression on the policeman's face hinted that he may have been at fault. Witnessing this case enabled me to understand how people such as Jerome and the young, black man could be criminalized so easily. As uncanny as it may seem, it was in the court room I discovered that accurate evidence is not needed to convict one of a serious crime.

While sitting on the bench with Tareian, my thoughts soared. Surprisingly, I didn't care if I was being questioned by adults as to why we were not in school. Despite the distractions, I reflected on my recent departure from JROTC, or should I say, my SAI. I appreciated my SAI, a lot. Sometimes I may have challenged his position in JROTC on several occasions, but I did so because I cared about him. I wanted him to understand that I wanted him to be human. I wanted him to live happily and freely. I knew how that uniform could constrain someone; I was in the process of breaking free. I was a silly boy, but confident. I knew I had the potential to change him, and honestly, I think I did. I summoned a different side of him who could not coexist with the person I sensed who submitted to in JROTC. Once I discovered the father in him to me, I wanted him to permanently stay. I never wanted him to leave, ever. I couldn't accept that he was also my authority figure. Therefore, I removed myself from JROTC. Foolishly, I believed that my departure would only allow me to experience the father in him, equally ensuring that I would never cross paths with my SAI.

There were times when he oppressed me. His oppressive force pushed in my direction was sometimes unintentional, but the times they were, hurt me. His refusal to read and appreciate several of my writings explaining my departure from JROTC pushed me back further and further. Those pages, filled with words, feelings, thoughts, and memories were once a part of me. I was courageous enough to share them with him. However, he threw them away as if they were nothing but trash. When he refused to accept the person I struggled to show him I am, I felt as if he disowned me, completely. Our bond gradually deteriorated. I finally succumbed to his oppressive force and allowed it to permanently push me away.

Once I saw Jerome my thoughts shifted, instantly. Nothing else mattered any more. Tareian and I had so much faith in him. Our attention could not be interrupted. We are aware that he's a good man. His fight for innocence is our fight too. Supporting Jerome was more valuable than sitting idle in someone's classroom. We care about him. After Jerome's hearing, he motioned for us to stay. I was excited, but nervous as well. "What should I say? What should I do? Be yourself." Jerome met us with a smile; it was the first aspect of him I noticed. He had similar features to me: Brown skin. Average height. Visibly in shape. Nice haircut. I forgot that Jerome was a prisoner. In fact, it no longer mattered. The blue shirt. The blue jeans. The shackles. None of it defined him. He questioned us about missing school to see him, but we simply laughed and reminded him that he was important to us as well. It warmed our hearts to know that he appreciated our presence in the courtroom. We also appreciated that he cared about our education as well. Since that day, Tareian and I have not given up on Jerome Morgan. We are like soldiers, fighting for a true freedom. Nothing like the freedom we all

were supposedly granted post-Civil War. We do not use rifles, bombs, or any other destructive weaponry. We use the firepower of our minds. Our minds will always be our greatest weapon if we truly wish to fight for justice.

Till this day Tareian King and I remain in contact with Jerome Morgan. Although we are separated by the prison system, our thoughts and voices will always be connected. The ability to write is a characteristic we all passionately possess and utilize. One of the primary ways we communicate with Jerome Morgan is through writing letters. Opening up to Jerome about ourselves and what occurs in our daily lives is not difficult to release from our minds and onto several lengthy sheets of paper, especially because Jerome is willing to share his life with us. In fact, he encourages us to express to him how we feel and whatever is on our mind. There are many moments when I feel as if I have no one to talk to about personal issues, such as the absence of my father. Talking about my father's absence in my life is a delicate topic that I rarely intend to discuss. When I first began writing Jerome Morgan, I was in the process of getting accustomed to my life without the paternal influence of my army instructor. The overwhelming feeling of isolation swiftly engulfed me. My attitude towards others, participation in class, and constant mood swings were due to my sudden transition. After my close friends and family members noticed how reclusive I had grown to be, I decided that I needed someone to share my thoughts with, because my suffering was once again identified. I wanted to be happy and free, as any human should be.

Jerome is the first person I felt the urge to contact during my time of struggle. He is the only person with whom I can easily exchange communication without fearing judgmental or oppressive comments in return. Since Jerome encourages us students outside the classroom who keep in touch to share our concerns, problems, and thoughts with him, I immediately engaged in writing him a letter about my life without a father; it turned out to be over seven pages long, but I honestly felt partially relieved of the heavy weight I have been carrying most of my life. I impatiently waited several days for Jerome's response to my letter to arrive at my home. Receiving letters from Jerome was exciting, and still is! I subconsciously obtained the habit of checking my mailbox every day. Even if I already checked the mail box, twice – that's just how important Jerome's letters are to me. When Jerome's letter finally arrived, I didn't know what to fully expect from him, because I never expressed myself to anyone so deeply before in my life, and never did I expect to express myself to a prisoner, ultimately because they are treated and viewed as savages who are incapable of living freely. Jerome's response to my letter dramatically influenced my current perspective of prisoners and the prison system.

While reading each line, I felt myself gradually healing. I realized that he and I were both experiencing forms of imprisonment differently, psychologically and physically. We have an understanding of the pain and loneliness we often find ourselves enduring. There are times in our lives when we may feel helpless and forget that there are those connected to us who will not give up on us. Reminding each other that our lives are too valuable to waste in a cell or consumed by depression enables us to continue living. In his letter, Jerome informed me that Tareian and I are an inspiration to him, which deeply touches me, giving me a reason to be happy and more alive than I previously had been. One aspect of his letter, which affected me the most was the line, "Let's get to it, son..." The pulse of my heart seemed to have increased, positively. Despite the many holes in my life without a male influence I found a father in Jerome Morgan. Whenever I need advice, help, or someone to talk to about anything, I know he'll always be here for me, because I'll always be here for him. Paternal love is a connection between a father and child.

LOST AND CONFUSED

BY JEROME MORGAN

Angola, 2012

Somehow, some way, I somewhat got lost in prison. At the very moment I was handcuffed and booked for a murder I knew I was totally innocent of and placed in the smelly parish prison, I was so confused about my surroundings. How would I fit in? I just couldn't pretend. First of all, I've been an outgoing and active person all of my young life. How could I just sit, wait, and do nothing all day, maybe even for weeks and months? Hopefully it won't take nothing close to a year. I was innocent, but I didn't want to come across to others as if I thought that I was better than them. I'm just so much better than this. We are all human beings. The innocent and the guilty. The lost and confused.

After I was fully processed in the system, I was placed in Orleans Parish Prison, B-2 right side, an open flat with triple bunks. It was like one large cage with too many people living in it. Maybe 25 -30 people! I only knew one person. We went to Nicholls together. We never hung out or nothing like that though. Of course, it felt good seeing a familiar face. Raul, that's his name. No longer than two days of me being there, I was hit in the back of the head with a broomstick as I was playing checkers with Raul with my back turned towards everything. I didn't know what hit me. I was confused.

I later found out that someone convinced my attacker that I had stolen his missing commissary. The deputies asked me why I did it. They punched me in the stomach. As I crouched over from the blow, they rammed my head into the wall because I denied it. I needed seven stitches to close the wound where the broomstick had broken across my head. My mind is like spaced out from the trauma. I was lost.

I was placed in the hole, the dungeon, lockdown, whatever they called it. I kept to myself, although I had three other people living in the cell with me. I believe it's safe to say that I carry myself with respect and dignity, being the kind of person that never felt the need to be trying desperately to impress nobody. In fact, I'd feel even better if they just left me alone. I'm confused.

Who was I fooling? I do have a very compassionate heart for anyone in distress. If a person felt frustrated about anything, I was always willing to listen and offer some advice without being judgmental. But please don't take my kindness for weakness. I would hate for anyone to do that. I'm not a violent person at all. Really, I hate to see people get hurt. I know how it feels to be hurt and not have someone who really cares. Some try to disguise it by taking their anger out on somebody else. I don't even like the idea of that way of doing things. I much rather challenge myself to be a bit smarter and allow me to control my frustration to help shape me into a better person. I am lost.

Eventually, I was taught not to be so nice. While I was in the hole, I eventually grew comfortable with the three people I was in the cell with. One day I offered to wash one of their pairs of tennis shoes while I was washing my own. I mean, I didn't think nothing of it. I really just needed something to do. One of my cell-mates, Spider, immediately warned me about being so kind to people you don't really know. He said, "Most dudes would try and play on that." Huh? Of course, I didn't want nobody playing on me for nothing! So, I kind of kept myself in check with being too friendly from that point on. I appreciated Spider for that.

I'm definitely no push-over by a long shot. I could get pissed off just like everybody else. Especially if you force my hand! One day a guy just hung up the phone on me while I was in the middle of a conversation with my girlfriend, yelling at me that it was not my turn, and that he was supposed to use it before me. My immediate reflex started throwing punches and did not want to stop. Others had to pull me off of the guy. I'm confused. Why didn't he find a better way to handle that situation?

Of course, I didn't win every single fight, but that wasn't the point. I'm lost. I really don't wanna have to fight. That's not me. Not against you! I feel like we should be able to discuss a problem and come to a better understanding, because I pride myself on being considerate of the next person, so please don't be inconsiderate of me. We trying to get out of jail and hopefully never come back.

My trial day finally arrives. The judge allows me a phone call to notify my family and have them to bring me some trial clothes. They bring me a plaid button-down short-sleeved shirt, khaki shorts, dress socks and brown loafers. I'm the only person in the courtroom wearing shorts! I'm confused, but I'll be free soon. A sixteen-year-old black male was killed, and two sixteen-year-olds were shot during a fight at a sweet sixteen party for a beautiful young girl. The look in the judge's green eyes seemed cold. The D.A.'s are mean. My court-appointed lawyer is not prepared, or he's not good, or he's working with them! Two teenagers from the party, one of the guys who was shot and a friend of the guy who was killed, get on the stand and swear up and down it was me! Me and four of my friends get on the stand and swear up and down that it wasn't: three of the guys who I was there with the entire time, who wasn't involved at all, and the other guy that was shot, the one I assisted after the shooting.

I'm removed from the courtroom and placed all alone in a holding cell while the jury deliberates. I'm scared. The D.A. made me and my witnesses look like fools. Since we couldn't prove someone else did the shooting, I must be guilty, because the D.A.'s witnesses seem certain it was me, despite the facts of the situation that show otherwise. My mind completely shuts down while I'm praying to God that if they don't find me not guilty, then please don't let them find me guilty of 2nd degree murder. I'll take the manslaughter conviction instead, because I can't possibly handle having to serve a life sentence. I'm lost.

I'm awakened. The verdict is in. Guilty as charged! My mind goes blank. My heart feels doomed. Life at hard labor without the benefit of parole, probation, or suspension of sentence! I'm confused. Guilty? I'm innocent! I was on the scene after the crime, while the real perpetrator was being chased as he escaped. I had absolutely nothing to do with what happened, except trying to help a guy I knew who got shot during the fight. What am I to do now?

My 18-year-old life flashed right before my eyes. I'm only 18! Will I ever be free again? Will I get a chance to graduate from high school, go to college, get married, raise a family, to be the best uncle to my nephew and niece? In a daze, I was lost! I thought, if we give it 2, maybe 3 years, they'll figure this out and I'll get my life back.

When I was brought back to the tier, the guys were surprised to see me. They couldn't believe it. Me either! One guy I was friends with was also scheduled for trial soon. He always declared his innocence. I advised him to get a plea bargain. "They don't care nothing about you being innocent. You're charged with the crime, you must be guilty." My friend, Quindell, agreed to 5 years of which he would only have to do 2 ½. I've never seen him again! Good! I call home and hear that an ex-girlfriend of mine just gave birth to a baby boy. Her family is saying he looks like me. I'm confused.

Two months after I was sentenced, I was at Hunt Correctional, awaiting processing to Angola! Please, Lord, don't put me in a position where I have to really hurt somebody trying to defend myself. I'm young, small, quiet, and lost to the ways and daily operations of prison. I don't know anybody in Angola and don't know what to expect. My aunt gives me her only advice: don't borrow anything from anybody.

I arrive at Angola at 18 years of age. My friends and family seem very supportive. The matriarch of my family, Mrs. Albertine Teapo, orchestrated much of that support. I'm feeling more confident in my innocence, thinking that the system is definitely going to realize this horrible mistake and have me released. My cellmate has already been away from society for 22 long years, militant, wearing a red, black, and green knitted beret so proudly covering a horrendous scar stretching from one ear to the next across the top of his head that he

suffered in a bout with security years ago. Ol' Castro was originally from Atlanta. Ol' Castro was getting old. He's making me confused.

I was sent to general population at the age of 19 with the help of an ex-girlfriend's best friend's dad. He introduced himself to me as "Writer, Keisha, Nina's best friend, daddy." Writer played for a locally known prison band called Mega Sound, a group of talented musicians who were awarded the status of trustee prisoners and played music for all of the warden's guests and even traveled to several venues outside of Angola. I was lost! I was on the West Yard/Wild Side. Writer was on the East Yard/Political Side. He said if I stayed clear of any write-ups for a period of 90 days, I could get a job other than the field and then be moved to the East Yard.

The work in the field was much rougher now. When I was in the cellblocks, we weren't expected to do the large scale work assignments, because the field lines were much smaller than those in general population. Oh, yeah, I got write-ups. Plenty of them! Work offenses were for not working with enough speed and efficiency. I began to get the notion that the field farmers were purposely requiring the work to be done at a fast pace, knowing damn well I wasn't accustomed to doing this kind of work, just so I would get left behind. This made my attitude worse. If the pace that I was working wasn't good enough, then so be it! At least I wasn't refusing to work at all. It's not like I'm getting paid! I'm confused.

Most of the younger prisoners stuck together, along with some of the older ones who could relate to our positions and didn't want to see any of us get stuck out and sent back to the cells. Or maybe some of the older ones wanted to win favor. Get you to thinking he's in your best interest, all the while intending to make you his possession. They call it mental gymnastics. Snaking. Being coldhearted, to some, was the measure of a strong man. I wasn't so convinced. In fact, everything about that whole perception seemed weak to me. I don't like nothing about the concept of taking advantage of people. It could get a lot of people hurt. Even killed. They don't even realize that's why we here. Being taken advantage of. And you find pleasure when you turn around and do it to somebody else. That's disgusting. Mentally sick! I'm lost.

Most of the prison population band together by area, city, neighborhood, or what you got going for yourself. I mostly got acquainted with other guys through my love for sports, playing football, basketball, and baseball. This caused a few fights, but nothing major. I also started to teach myself to cut hair to occupy my time and to make me a few pennies to keep myself from having to ask anybody for nothing. Plus, I needed some kind of outlet to attend to that artist inside of me. My main problems came from security and slave labor. I always declined any help in the field; I'll gladly take the write-ups; I already got life in prison. The disciplinary board would pile me up with extra duty. That meant work on Saturdays and Sundays. Seven days a week for months at a time! Isn't that against the law? Especially since I've been wrongfully convicted! I'm confused.

I want out! When are the courts going to give my freedom back that they have stripped from me for no reason? Am I really here in a place I believe should never be allowed on the face of the earth? This is indeed slavery! And racist! There's no whites even close to my age going on the field. To tell you the truth, they don't seem to have many whites in jail, as far as I can see. Not nowhere near compared to blacks. Whenever I do see a group of whites, they always have the better job positions and privileges. Oh, I get it! But where's the older prisoners who could properly direct me into my wisdom? None that I could see. Some of the older prisoners are even more ignorant than me. Or mis-educated. I'm confused.

My grandfather referred me to a guy that was here when he was doing time in Angola. I met with the guy one day, told him who I was, and explained my situation. The guy's odor was so terrible I began to think that he hadn't showered since him and my grandpa was in Angola together. He was no help at all. I was still lost.

Every single day I called my girlfriend, Shondell, collect. She, her mother, and younger sister always accepted my calls. Shondell and my cousin, Shontil, came to visit me twice a month. I got visits from my childhood friends, Rommel and Jeffery, who were with me at the party, and knew firsthand that I am innocent, along

with my best friend Lesley, and my Auntie Julia. My grandmother was getting old. She and my grandpa visited me with Shondell and the rest of the family, but I was troubled seeing my grandma using a walker. I was frustrated with myself for having her go through all that just to come visit me. I can't bear the thought of her injuring herself trying to board the prison bus. I'm confused. I make a request to have her name removed from my visitors' list to prevent her from sending herself through the trouble just for my sake. My Auntie Julia died.

I still had a state-appointed attorney for purposes of filing appeal. There was no need to waste money my family didn't have to afford a paid attorney. This should have been simple. Everybody knows that I am innocent. And once the appeals court reads the record, they'll see that for themselves.

I started to get acquainted with two guys from out of the Desire Project. They were brothers, Sleepy and Chubby. One day we sat out on the yard, conversing while they allowed me to look through their family photos. I recognized Patrice. She's the niece of my mother's husband. Sleepy said, "That's my cousin." I told him I went to Kennedy with Patrice, but I never met my mother's husband. Chubby said, "That's our Uncle Michael." I'm lost. I explain that my mother is in St. Gabriel and my brother seems to also be on his way to Angola. But, I'm innocent.

Chubby and Sleepy advised me that the appeal process is not as easy as I think. They offered to teach me law to file a supplemental appeal on my own behalf. I am not a lawyer and reading law cases seems like learning a foreign language to me. I follow their lead. They help me to litigate a supplemental appeal claim of "Insufficient Evidence." (*Jackson vs. Virginia*) I submit it to the courts. I wait. In a matter of months, I am called to pick up some legal mail from the prison package room. Appeal denied! Two years to file post-conviction relief application! I'm confused. They teach me more. We research, shepardize [checking the legal citatory *Shepard's Citations* for relevant precedents], study the transcript, take notes.

I get sent to the cellblocks for defiance and aggravated disobedience. I meet up with my brother, Harry. It all seems so unreal. Me and my older brother are all the way in Angola together. How did this happen? We need to get out. Harry's attitude is far worse than mine. The family is very unsupportive of him. He feels misunderstood. I try to console him with the fact that I care. He gets sent to lockdown. Shondell gets pregnant and is planning to get married to the father of her child. She visits me to tell me face to face and let me know that she won't be back to visit me ever again. Never? I'm lost. I give her my blessing.

I'm dying inside. I make it back to the dorm, file my post-conviction relief application a day before the deadline. Edward Lombard, clerk of court, 1515 Poydras. I submit to the court issues of ineffective assistance of counsel, prosecutorial misconduct, insufficient evidence. Pro se litigant.

Karlas comes into my life. She said she's been trying to get in touch with me since my arrest. She believes in my innocence. We've been friends since the age of eleven. She visits me as a friend. My little sister has gotten older; she begins to visit me on her own as well, bringing my two nephews, Jerome and Ja'Mel. I earn my GED. I get sent to lockdown for inciting a riot. I'm confused. All I did was suggest to the field farmer that it would be less strenuous on us workers if we did the work a different way.

My post-conviction application is denied! I inadvertently mailed the application to the wrong court building. It should've been addressed to 2700 Tulane Avenue. Why couldn't they just forward it to the proper court? I filed in good faith. Now the higher courts are also denying me any review, ruling that my time to file has expired since I was not "properly" filed from the beginning. I am lost.

Karlas gets married. I'm so happy for her. No more room in her life to be my friend! I'm confused. My grandmother dies. I make it back to the cellblocks. My grandfather dies. I get sent back to lockdown. I'm really lost, or about to lose it.

I gather my strength and refuse to give up! Harry wins his appeal. I don't want to pressure him. I have an idea. I'll go on a letter-writing campaign. I get my hands on the legal directory and randomly select names of Baton Rouge and New Orleans area attorneys, and other investigative agencies. I mail them all a letter explaining my innocence. I mail one to my cousin, Shontil, to bring with her to a rally at the state capitol and hand out to anyone of the legal profession. I mail one each to Rommel and Jeff, and ask them to go the rally as well. I mail copies of this same letter to any and everyone I could possibly think of. I get an address to an innocence organization that has recently been formed in New Orleans from a fellow prisoner named Chicken, and mail one there. I wait anxiously. I'm in contact with Tamika, the ex-girlfriend who gave birth to our son, Justin, whom I have yet to meet. I'm nervous. I'm excited. I get a few responses from Della Hayes, Lionel Berniard, Innocence Project at New Orleans and two young New Orleans college students, Shannon and Aeryn, who are closely associated with my friend, Rommel. I respond to each one of their letters. Aeryn takes full charge!

I make it back to the cellblocks. I'm there for 3 weeks. An incident erupts at work in the field. Security wants us to work in the rain. Policy states that once it begins to rain, the field lines are to be brought in. A couple guys refuse, Poo-man and Kevin. Security tries to approach Kevin. He strikes the officer across the back with his work tool, an L-blade. Shots are fired from the gun guard. They signal for back up. I'm in close proximity to Poo-Man and Kevin. I feel that they are at too much of a disadvantage. I'm confused. Should I help or turn my back and walk away with everyone else? I stand there. Kevin lets me off the hook by pitching me his hat and glasses while motioning me to go about my business. So many guards start beating on Poo-Man and Kevin that you couldn't even see them at the bottom of the pile. A lot of broken bones, loud screams, a lot of blood! I feel hurt. I feel dehumanized. I am happy not to have to go back on lockdown though.

Aeryn is advocating my innocence more than anybody has ever done. I feel blessed! She and Shannon send letters to Montel Williams and Oprah Winfrey. Aeryn, Shannon, Jeff, and Rommel all visit me. She arranges to raise money to afford me a private attorney, interviews a couple, and I instruct her not to dare give anybody any money unless they agree to come meet with me in person. No one agrees to meet with me in person, but they all want to be hired as my attorney. No deal! Aeryn sets her sites on IPNO. She speaks with Robert Hoelscher and offers to be trained as an investigator to help them solve my case. I get subpoenaed to Jefferson Parish court to possibly testify on behalf of a guy who was once my cellmate and now is being tried for the death penalty. My testimony is not needed. But, while I am in the Jefferson Parish jail, I receive a visit from Tamika and Aeryn. Aeryn and I decide to become romantically involved. Things remain difficult. Justice moves slow. The pressure of being in an intimate relationship with one another mounts to high levels of frustration and impatience. I'm confused. She's confused. There is no significant progress on my case yet. Our relationship falls apart. She gets married. No more time in her life to continue helping me prove my innocence. Surely, I offer her my sincerest well wishes. I do understand. I'm lost again. How can I not feel discouraged?

IPNO continues to keep in touch. They visit quite often... John Adcock, David Parks, Emily Maw, Richard Davis, volunteers, and interns. For some reason they refuse to abandon me. They have actually become my only hope.

Harry gets killed. Contact with friends and family are few and far between. I have to keep my nose clean. I have a son. I have been trying so subtly over the years to persuade Tamika to finally allow me to meet him. She says he's not ready, which really means she's not ready to have to answer his questions. I don't want to push too hard. I'm here, she's out there. I would hate for her to just shut me out altogether. My family doesn't seem to want to get involved. Yes, they know Tamika, but still choose to believe her son is not mine, even though not one of them ever took the time out to meet Justin. I'm confused. I refuse to let anything discourage me concerning my child.

Justin and I finally meet. Not long thereafter, a document that can prove my innocence, which was never turned over by the D.A. is discovered by IPNO. I'm thrilled. Before taking action, IPNO wants to talk with the witnesses to see if they are also willing to come forth with the truth. All of a sudden, Katrina comes through the gulf and tears through New Orleans. I'm lost.

Everyone is located in my family, with the exception of my son. I'm confused. All on-line information on his mother is invalid. I refuse to give up hope, or I'll be lost.

Ebony joins IPNO and regains some momentum in my case. She encourages me to get a degree in graphic arts. I accomplish that goal. She departs. Kristin is hired as staff attorney and is assigned to my case. After a couple of years of Kristin's persistent, but failed, attempts to interview key witnesses, Mosi is then called to the rescue. He makes progress...significant progress!

I get sent to lockdown for being caught with a cellular phone. I'm confused. Collect calls from Angola are extremely expensive. I enjoy being so much less of a financial burden on my family and friends. Due to my possession of a cell phone, my younger nephew was able to talk to his dad for the very first time in his entire life, which led to him meeting and spending time with his family members on his father's side. He spent holidays with them, and his grades began picking up.

Mosi makes even more progress on the case. The D.A.'s main witness admits that he was pressured by the detectives to lie and identify me as the shooter. I make it back to the cellblocks. Red River floods! Angola evacuates the cellblocks to Avoyelles Correctional in Cottonport. I'm lost. IPNO finally decides to file the new evidence of my innocence into court.

We are returned to Angola. Mosi provides me with a copy of a book written by teachers and students. It is entitled, *The Long Ride*. It educates me about events and people in my city's history that I never knew. I was so moved by their writing, I wrote something to them in response. I make it back to the dorm. The court grants us a hearing! Through Mosi, I'm given the opportunity to connect with a lot of really wonderful people. My very first time, back in court! New Orleans! New judge! It's been 18 years, and I was 18 years old back then. The hearing will be strictly concerning when the new evidence was discovered, and if it was filed into court in a timely manner. My attorneys, Emily and Kristin, think it would be good if I would testify to give the judge a chance to view my character while I'm being questioned by both sides. Great idea!

I'm so nervous. I'm trying my best to calm myself. Will the judge think that I'm lost or just confused? The courtroom is freezing. I'm chained up like a monster. I'm not permitted by Angola to wear any undergarments under the orange short-sleeved prison suit. I'm starting to shake so much I begin to hear the chains that I am wearing rattling. I look back into the audience and smile at my family. I need their strength. Between my nervousness and the temperature, I can't seem to get myself settled. I start to doubt myself. Maybe I shouldn't take the witness stand. I don't want to mess everything up and look like a fool. But, I do need to speak. I've been waiting for this opportunity for far too long. I'm confused.

Just as I further begin to entertain my doubtfulness, I hear a crowd of people arrive in the audience section of the courtroom. They sound like an army. Better yet! Scratch that! They look like a community! It is some of the students and educators who wrote *The Long Ride* and many more students from two different high schools, wearing their school uniforms. A deep-hearted smile appears on my face. Their presence is nothing less than a gift from God. I feel an enormous sense of empowerment. They didn't let me down, so I knew I wouldn't let them down. We are all being uplifted with the power of righteousness, justice, and truth! The school of life is in session. We've been lost in a system that strips away our being, and confused with trying to live a life that conforms to the inhumane ways of greed. And I'll be lost and confused until I'm truly free!

CHAPTER THREE: KINDRED 360°: WOMEN'S WRITING FROM THE INSIDE TO THE OUTSIDE

THREE STRIKES BY TAREIAN KING

I'm thinking. I'm looking around. I'm thinking. I'm communicating. I'm listening. I'm thinking. I don't want to catch a ride. I want to walk so I can observe and think. I get my dollar twenty five out so I can get on the public transportation, the RTA. I'm listening. I'm looking around but not too hard to where I'm overlooking my elders. When they get on and nobody else gets up, I get up. That's the rule. (If you didn't know I stopped my train of thought to tell you. Back to thinking.) I'm thinking and giving dirty looks to the people who didn't get up for their elders. I'm observing. I'm thinking. During the walk home, I'm observing and thinking. While I'm sleeping, I'm thinking. I just can't get it off my mind. Throughout this whole process I still hadn't figured it out. It never had come to me. The opening sentence for my introduction or the spark to writing about women being incarcerated never came to me. As a writer this had never happened to me.

I thought LONG and hard about how I would start this introduction. Nothing good came to me. Other people may have liked some of my choices, but I didn't. It was hard for me to connect to the topic of women being incarcerated. I, along with three other students at Eleanor McMain, worked for approximately four months with four women who were formerly incarcerated at St. Gabriel Prison. When I found out about the opportunity to work with women who were incarcerated at St. Gabriel Prison through ArtSpot Productions, I jumped right in. I was interested in incarceration, but I had never thought about women being incarcerated. It was this experience that opened my eyes to the bold fact that women are incarcerated. Their stories were real. Their experiences were real. Their incarceration was real. We put their voices into writing. We listened to their stories, each found personal connections, and we put everything in writing. We created a space that helped them overcome their past.

Students at the Center had decided to put a book together on incarceration, and I was initially assigned to edit the section on St. Gabriel Prison. I guess my work with the women from St. Gabriel made them feel as if I was the perfect fit. When I thought about the discussions with the women and the students, including myself, I realized we didn't talk about their life in prison. We talked about life and learning from your mistakes. We did not discuss the daily routine of their life in St. Gabriel. I did not know about how the guards treated them, the food, health services, and/or their responsibilities while they were in prison. Once I received the assignment, I could have called and asked them these types of questions, but quite frankly I didn't want them to re-live or remember any moments of them being inmates. I didn't want them to think about their life when they didn't have freedom. When I came to the realization that I would not ask the women these types of questions, it changed my outline for my section. I tried to research information on St. Gabriel, but there were only a few resources. There was tons of information available on Angola Penitentiary, and this made me upset. Why weren't any books published on St. Gabriel? Why didn't Google spit out pages of information on St. Gabriel Prison? I went on a search for information on St. Gabriel and a connection.

When I began researching, I realized that women were overlooked in the criminal justice system. It was a step, but I still did not have that personal connection. I needed to see women being incarcerated with my own eyes. I found out that a documentary exists called *900 Women in St. Gabriel Prison*. I tried my best to hunt down the documentary, but it was nowhere to be found. When I finally found the documentary, I learned I would have to order it for \$65. I called the company, Women Make Movies, to see if I could order the documentary for a

lower price, but I never got an answer. I left messages but never received a phone call back. I thought it was a dead end. I visited the Loyola University library and found a couple of books on women being incarcerated. I had decided to broaden the section on women in general being incarcerated and not just women in St. Gabriel. I was not a student at Loyola, so when I did find a helpful book, I had to take pictures with my cell phone of the pages with the information that stood out the most to me. On the second day I returned to Loyola to read the book, I stayed until closing time, and I also found out they had the documentary. On the third day I stood outside Loyola University waiting on a random person whom I felt comfortable with asking to check the book and video out for me. I didn't want to disturb the people in the library. The first person I saw outside was a female, and she was willing but the problem was she was already running late for class. It took me about ten minutes to swallow my pride and five minutes to look for person two. She was walking super slowly, so I assumed she didn't have a class. She agreed to do me the favor. I thanked her like a thousand times and promised that I would return everything.

There it was. The documentary. This was my moment. This was my connection. I had the opportunity to see what incarcerated women went through with my own eyes! Words can't explain how excited and happy I was. After a while I was thirty minutes into the documentary, and my connection had never come. After the video was over I felt like I had done more research, but there was still no connection in my heart. Something was wrong with me. I questioned myself. What was it? I thought maybe it was the fact that my passion about the criminal justice system came from my father being incarcerated during my childhood. I thought maybe the reason I had a hard time connecting to women was because my focus only consisted of African American males. I was affected by my father being incarcerated, and my passion had grown to focus on young African American males becoming victims of the criminal justice system. Frustrated and aggravated, I returned the documentary and the VCR cassette to where they belonged. I realized I had been so excited to watch the documentary, I had forgotten to include the book with the rest of the stuff to get checked out. I wasn't in the mood to go find someone else to check it out, so I just put the book back on hold. I went home and thought about who I knew that was a student at Loyola. No one. I thought about students who had graduated from Eleanor McMMain, my high school, and I remembered Lizanne Coleman. I uploaded my acceptance letter to Loyola on Facebook one day, and I remembered her commenting "Welcome to the Wolfpack." I later on learned that she is also a member of Students at the Center and even worked with ArtSpot on setting up and designing the IROC program, of which she was one of the founders. I found her page and messaged her, asking if she still attended Loyola. She informed she did, and she was the person who checked the book out for me and delivered it to me.

I was guilty of overlooking incarcerated women, and I am a young woman myself. I always focused my studies on incarcerated men, while easily forgetting my own gender. I thought about how to open my chapter literally every minute in the day. I did not exaggerate my thinking process. I wanted people to feel my disconnection. Women as I knew them were support systems for each other. Women understood women. When I would be around women and they would see another woman strung out on crack, I would hear comments like "children would do that to you. You raise them to the best of your ability, and they just turn out of control." or I would hear "men will take you places you never been or knew existed." It would always be a sense of understanding and a nonjudgmental vibe. Women connected. What was my problem? I couldn't even connect to my own gender: how was I supposed to write about us?

I would say researching on women being incarcerated and attempting to write about it was a huge challenge for me. I did everything I could to feel connected to the topic. I spent so much time researching; but I realized that I wasn't producing anything. I had the pieces from the students at McMMain, but I had never revisited them or written anything new. I decided to put the personal connection to the side and just start. I ran into a problem. Timing. My timing was horrible. The majority of my time went to the Posse Foundation, which is how I received my full scholarship to Bard College. Posse had weekly meetings, sometimes twice a week. I volunteered

at the Rome, Butler, & Rome law firm in the mornings, and I usually had meetings for Students at the Center afterwards. When I wanted to just start writing, I had to go to a retreat in Baton Rouge for Posse. My laptop wouldn't fit in the one bag we were allowed to bring, so I had to leave it behind. I had a lot going on in my life the week of the retreat, and it would have been okay and understandable for me to not write the introduction for my section. Although SAC understood, I wasn't going to give up. I thought about the lack of resources on St. Gabriel, and I thought about how our book *Go to Jail* has a section on men being incarcerated and writings from incarcerated men. At that point, I wasn't worrying about the personal connection. My priority was to make sure the world knew about women being incarcerated. I would not let the subject of women being incarcerated be overlooked on my watch.

On the ride back to New Orleans from the retreat in Baton Rouge, I just thought about women. I thought about what women went through, how women were abused, what women allowed to happen to them, etc.... I thought about all of the pain that a woman can have. I thought about all of the pain I had and the events I let happen in my life. I thought about how women become victims of society. Women are abused mentally and physically and are silenced about it. Most women I know are underpaid and are single parents who have children to take care of. I thought about the social things that affect women that may lead them to violence and/or incarceration. My goal was not only to make people aware that women are incarcerated but to be open-minded about what women go through that led them to being inmates and to make a difference.

At this point, I had everything mapped out. I knew what I wanted to talk about, and I had gotten over the fact I didn't have a personal connection. I came home from Baton Rouge on a Thursday. I had to do community service that Friday. I had Posse Olympics and my grandmother's party on Saturday. I would produce work on Sunday. The Posse Olympics was cancelled due to the bad weather, so I went to Laplace with my mother to help my grandmother get ready for her 60th birthday party. In the middle of my grandmother's party, the FBI came and picked her up to put her in witness protection. I knew it was going to happen. I was sitting outside on the curb watching their cars. They pulled off and drove in front of my grandmother's house and turned on their emergency blinkers. I knew why they were there and where she was going. As I cried, I knew that this experience was my personal connection. This was the personal connection that I had waited on and spent hours thinking about, the connection that I tried to find in the documentary. It had finally come to me, and I was saying fuck it with every emotion I had in me. My own grandmother. I knew about the situation the whole time, but it was a reality I wasn't ready to face, let alone write about it. I did not know when, or if, I would see her again or talk to her, but I knew I would write. Not having a personal connection was what restricted me from writing. I had gotten my personal connection. I was face to face with it, I felt it, whether I wanted it or not. Now that I had it, it was time for me to write. I didn't know how it would come out, but I was going to get it out. I was going to say something.... I didn't have any goals or outline for my section, but I knew I hated the system and wanted to see it fall. I was going make the system feel my pain one way or another.

I learned that my grandmother could have been your grandmother, mother, sister, or aunt. I learned that that the system does not excuse a woman from anything. I am ready to retaliate against them. I will spread knowledge to people that will make them aware and inspire them to make a difference. The less people we have falling victim to the system, the more I win. "Three strikes you're out!" See, my grandmother was their third strike against me. It's about time I start striking back. Every person I reach out to, every person I make aware, every person who makes an attempt to prevent women falling victim to this society and the criminal justice system is helping me strike back. I'm not the only person they been striking against. How many people you know in jail? What's your income? Do you have children? What's their school like? Do they have the education they deserve? The system strikes against everybody. It's about time somebody starts to show them how strikes feel.

AN INCARCERATED MOTHER FACES THE GREATEST LOSS

BY QUYNH-TRAM TRAN

Incarcerated people's lives are usually overlooked. There are many hidden factors beneath the surface of an incarcerated person's life that you may never expect from his or her appearance and personality. But have you ever taken into consideration how an incarcerated mother feels towards her family and children when she has to leave them for a long period of time to stay in prison? I never even pondered the thought before, until Kathy and Rebecca from ArtSpot Productions allowed my classmates and me to meet with formerly incarcerated women.

Artspot Productions is "an ensemble of artists dedicated to creating live theater in New Orleans." They came up with *Kindred 360°*, a project in which students can interview formerly incarcerated women. Every single one of the incarcerated women we met had an issue regarding her children. They made wrong decisions in their lives, not realizing that those decisions would affect the relationships between them and their children, and they only started noticing and pondering it once they were imprisoned for a long period of time.

Out of the four women, I chose to be assigned to Mona Lisa. You see, Mona Lisa's story stood out to me most, especially the part relating to the separation between her and her son. Mona Lisa remembers the time she spent in prison clearly by heart: she was incarcerated for seventeen years, eight months, and two days. While she was still in prison serving her time, she got the traumatic news that her nineteen-year-old son was murdered by two boys. She was allowed to go to her son's case at a court, and there she met the boys who killed her son. She told me, "The prettiest boys killed my son." Mona Lisa regrets that she didn't fulfill her motherly duty of being by her son's side his whole life, and she says that if she hadn't been incarcerated, he probably wouldn't have gotten murdered. He would've been set straight, and she could've protected him.

Usually, when a person spends quite a bit of her time telling a story, I space out and daydream—I don't intend to be rude, it's just a bad habit. Mona Lisa spent about ten minutes telling her story, and the whole time I was fully paying attention because I was so interested. My attention was captured immediately, and my thoughts began popping. She must've felt really horrible, being in a prison and hearing such traumatic news. How in the world did she handle this? I can't imagine the hurt and regret Mona Lisa suffered, and this probably has to be one of the worst events in her life.

Not only did Mona Lisa get separated from her son because of her incarceration, she even suffered losing him forever and not being able to see him anymore. However, while she was imprisoned for almost eighteen years, something just took control of her mind and began getting her to think positively. "The bad choices made me a better person today," Mona Lisa said. She didn't allow the judge to give a lifetime sentence to the boys who murdered her son; she told the judge to just sentence them to 19 years at Angola, since that's how old her son was when he was murdered.

Again, I started to wonder: Is being easily forgiving actually the best thing to do? Her story is nothing I have ever heard of before. I never knew such things happened. What if I had a son who got murdered? Would and should I handle the problem the way Mona Lisa did? Honestly, if I were ever incarcerated like Mona Lisa, I don't think I would be as easily forgiving. I'm not saying incarceration is always a guaranteed "good way to experience and recollect one's thoughts and to get one's life back together." However, it was according to Mona Lisa, and maybe that's why she became so forgiving.

"If they can survive at Angola for nineteen years, then it is a good enough sentence for them," Mona Lisa said. Angola was formerly a slave plantation, and now in the present, it still functions in the same way, a "prison farm" that forces prisoners to do hard labor, eat little, and live just the way slaves used to, with no freedom

given at all. To Mona Lisa, Angola was like hell. She said, "I made mistakes, so I didn't want to condemn anyone else. Forgiveness is all. Unforgiveness weighs you down." Being able to forgive the boys who murdered her son is a very courageous and difficult thing to do, but Mona Lisa did it anyway.

Aside from Mona Lisa's forgiveness for her son's murderers, I still cannot bring myself to believe that slavery is still legal in another form, and yet many people do not realize this important issue. The proof is directly in the thirteenth amendment. "The Thirteenth Amendment" states, "Section 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, nor any place subject to their jurisdiction." This amendment allows prison farms like Angola, the former slave plantation, to function legally in the United States. When this part of the amendment was brought to my attention, I immediately decided that it was contradictory and wrong. Then, I slowly began to realize and understand exactly why Mona Lisa didn't allow those "two pretty boys" who murdered her son to serve their lifetimes in prison. It was too cruel, but then again, murder is also too cruel.

Maybe it's even deeper than cruelty, this continued enslavement. Mona Lisa's heart refused to place those fellow black boys forever in a deep, dark, and hopeless prison that has the word "slavery" slapped all over its name and reputation. The decision of forever taking away those boys' lives, happiness, and humanity was in her hands. Maybe Mona Lisa understood this on some level. Prisons do not have a sense of sympathy, pity, comfort, or love for any prisoner. They do not seem to categorize prisoners as human at all. We see evidence of this when women who gave "birth behind bars" are asked to tell their stories and feelings of hurt.

Thousands of pregnant women enter jail or prison each year. Over twenty years ago, in 1992, a woman named Mercedes Smith got shackled in chains and handcuffed by guards when she was on her way from prison to the hospital to give birth to her child. This isn't even humane treatment; the guards treated her like she was an animal, an inanimate object. And when she arrived at the hospital, they handcuffed her to the bed rail. Of course, Smith had no voice. She couldn't complain or tell them anything because she was a prisoner.

How does it feel? Like swimming in a pool, but when you try to dive upwards for a breath or two of air, you find the surface of the water enclosed with a plastic covering. Like you're swimming in a place with no opening for air, and you feel trapped and restrained. It opens your eyes to realize how harshly the label is put on you once you are a prisoner. No one cares if you're going into labor or if you're about to die. You've made a mistake, but you will never be forgiven. Forever condemned, especially with that label of "formerly incarcerated."

No one has really truly opened their eyes to realize the disadvantages and hardships a formerly incarcerated mother goes through after being released from prison. Michelle Alexander made me realize so much from her book *The New Jim Crow*. She presents that incarceration is actually just a newly designed form of Jim Crow because it mainly discriminates against African-Americans and takes away their rights and privileges in society they once had before being incarcerated. "Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination are suddenly legal." Once formerly incarcerated mothers are released from prison, they often find difficulty and hardship with voting, participating in juries, finding a job, renting a house, getting loans, attending schools, and registering for licenses and welfare benefits.

It makes it even more difficult for the formerly incarcerated women to fend for their children and to provide for their family if these restrictions are being held against them. It's just too cruel that they are being released into a society which is completely different from the one they once knew. Now you consider and tell me how a formerly incarcerated mother is supposed to feel from this discrimination, treatment, and cruelty.

Speaking of cruelty, John Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers* contains a specific sentence that gets readers to think, "Wow, is the mother cruel or what?" It deals with a mother and her child's relationship: "But knowing nothing had its dark side, created a concern that sometimes caused my mother, in spite of herself, to pray for Robby's capture. Prison seemed safer than the streets. As long as he was free, there was a chance Robby could hurt

someone or be killed.” A mother can love in many questionable ways, and readers may look at Wideman’s mother with raised eyebrows and angered eyes for praying for her son’s capture. On the other hand, people may also look at Mona Lisa with “raised eyebrows and angered eyes” for the forgiveness she grants the boys who murdered her son. She says that it was God who allowed her to forgive.

Thinking from Mona Lisa’s son’s point of view, we don’t know how he truly felt about having an incarcerated mother. He most likely had been hurt and sad. Imagine having a “criminal” mother who is separated from you for years; wouldn’t you be hurt and sad, too? I decided to interview Tareian King, who is also a part of the Kindred 360 project with Kathy and Rebecca from Artspot. Tareian and I are connected through the Students at the Center program, and we got the opportunity to be a part of this Artspot Productions Kindred 360 project through the Students at the Center classes at McMinn—including dual enrollment AP English and writing classes through Bard College. We are doing readings in our SAC/AP classes that incorporate and strongly help us with this project.

Tareian has a similar experience as Mona Lisa’s son because she was separated from her incarcerated father when she was very young, and his imprisonment has also affected their relationship with each other as an incarcerated father and daughter. I can understand Tareian’s feelings, the uneasy, uncomfortable feeling within a quiet and awkward atmosphere with a person you would consider a stranger. Imagine how that would feel to a very young child like Tareian.

Being a very young daughter, Tareian got separated from her father via the prison. When he got out, she felt so unconnected and unfamiliar to his physical presence. However, they had already connected and bonded while he was in prison through writing and telephoning each other. This way, when he was incarcerated for the second time and got released, Tareian was reassured and never felt disconnected when he came home for good. Hearing the outcome, I am happy for Tareian because as a teenage adult, she still has a strong bond and relationship with her formerly incarcerated father. I can relate to Tareian because I never felt a bond or even the feeling of love from my father when I was a kid until I was an early teenager. However, now I feel very close to him, and I understand him very well.

Mona Lisa’s story about her incarceration and her son inspired me to relate the topic to my mother and me. Hearing and learning from Mona Lisa’s story strengthened my fear of losing my mother physically and mentally. Mona Lisa raises a very important moral and presents it through her action of forgiveness. She actually helps me to strengthen my forgiveness towards my mother, and I am able to understand my mother’s actions and words better now. I need to be extremely careful of protecting my mother from this society.

The way our society is set up separates parents from their children. Prison is the most obvious prime example as a legal, social institution. Statistics state in 2009: “More than half of incarcerated parents in a state prison and almost half of parents in a federal prison have never had a personal visit from their child(ren).” And also, there are more than 1.7 million children in the United States with an incarcerated parent. Imagine all of those bonds and relationships being torn apart, and parents and children are separated because of the incarceration. It is a pity, and something has to be done about it.

Other than the prison example, another example is the legalized practice of gambling. Over time, gambling has been made legal in the majority of the United States. You might be wondering, “How are gambling and incarceration related in the process of separating and destroying the bonds between parents and their children?” Well, gambling almost tore my parents apart via divorce. My father didn’t approve that my mother was gambling her salary away every time after working ‘til four or five in the morning.

They fought five times with the end result of my mother swearing to God and promising that she wouldn’t do it again. The result? She tried to be sneaky and kept gambling her money away, but she always got caught. I love God just as much as Mona Lisa does, and I thank Him for not separating my parents and breaking our

family apart. Even though we don't know for sure if she's truly stopped or not, we pray to God and hope that her addiction will fade away forever for the sake of our family. If my parents were to divorce, I would have to live with one parent or the other. Nothing would feel or be the same any more. Actually, things aren't exactly the same any more due to trust issues and such, but the atmosphere is lightening and getting better. The one question I will always wonder is, "Why is gambling legal?" I don't get it, and I never will. But if gambling was illegal, then my mother could have got incarcerated.

"How can you swear to God more than once and take it lightly as if it is a joke?" That's the question I will always hold against my mother, but I don't have the courage to ask her to her face. She is very fierce and very defensive. Hell, if she knew I incorporated her into this essay, she would fuss and yell like there is no tomorrow. She would be ashamed, embarrassed, and disappointed in me if she ever reads this essay. But hey, it's the truth. And the truth needs to be heard and known.

What if my mother gets incarcerated and has to separate from me for a long period of time, staying in prison for a majority of her life? What will I do then, and how will I react? If my mother ever gets incarcerated and gets put in prison for a long period of time, I will try my utmost to keep her company by visiting her or by writing letters to her, providing her with books to read and television to watch. I will do whatever it takes to keep the gap between us as closed as possible. I don't want to regret the way Mona Lisa did. If my mother ever gets incarcerated and gets put in prison for a long period of time, I won't ever shut her out. I admit that I might get really angry at her, though, but I have learned from Mona Lisa that I must allow God to work his magic through and within me to forgive and love.

Even if she murders someone, which is the worst thing a human being can do, I will still love her and accept her position in my life. If she decides to do drugs, I will try my best to help her by immediately notifying my father and then finding a therapist for her. I can never shut my mother out of my life because she has been a part of it since day one. Even if for some unknown reason that I can't imagine, she murders me, I will still love her. I just love my mother for all that she does. I pray to God that her gambling addiction ends, and as a daughter, I feel pity.

I know many of you haven't taken into consideration how an incarcerated mother would feel towards her family and children and how the children would feel about their incarcerated mother leaving them for a long period of time to stay in prison. I mean, honestly, have you taken into consideration this topic or even applied it to your very own relationship with your mother? Society is just a mess now with the way it is set up. Not only is the criminal justice system separating incarcerated mothers from their children, it is also destroying close bonds and relationships. And that is why so many incarcerated mothers lose important people in their lives after being released from prison. Mona Lisa was an incarcerated mother, and I write this to convey the message, the feelings, the emotions, and the needed change.

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THE LORD WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS

BY BRIANE PERKINS

What is destiny? Is it what people say when they knew something was going to happen or is it when people believe there is no possible other way the situation could have happened? The dictionary says that destiny is predetermined events considered as something beyond human power and control. But who decides these predetermined events? Almighty God? You? Or the fortune teller sitting on the corner of Canal St?

We were bound to meet; we met to bond, destined to share our stories. Each different yet similar, each story having its own significance in our own life. The test is to share the story, listen to each other's story and sincerely care for the story. The way we, society in general, have lived our lives in the past has a huge influence on the way we live our lives now. So how did our decisions in the past help shape us? Was it for better or worse? How did it change us, and was the change worth it?

My life has consisted of constant change. I have learned to adapt to my surroundings. Sometimes my adaptations don't do me any justice. I've developed a silence. I never speak about my private life, but if anyone can see the things I see and how I see them, they would be silent as well.

Recently I have joined Iroc, Individuals Related and Overcoming Conflict, just through curiosity. Now I'm staying because I'm comfortable. I think this project of working with previously incarcerated women will help me to maybe overcome some of my self-made restrictions. My silence within has become golden, but there is a time when everything in your body has to be released. Instead of talking to a counselor, I feel more comfortable speaking to someone who also is confiding in me.

Ms. Sherral and I are destined to work together. So far the personal connections have nearly scared me honestly. Well in more words or less they have. It seems like I'm the daughter and she's the mother in our relationship, all besides the fact that she is a mother and I'm a young daughter. It's deeper than that though. I treat my mother as a child, and Ms. Sherral's children treat her the same way. Ms. Sherral may be the answer to all my worries, and I'm certainly willing to take a chance and find out if she is. She has, as well, expressed interest in finding out how I'm thinking and what makes me close my mother out of my life. She feels that it will in turn help her understand what her children are going through.

To get to know each other better Ms. Sherral and I were assigned to sit in a corner and talk. She started right off asking me about myself. I could tell she's not shy at all. Although I was a little shocked because I thought I was supposed to be asking the questions, I began telling her about myself.

"Well I'm 17 years old will be 18 in a week, umm I'm a junior, a cheerleader, I'm one of five children."

She stopped me for a quick question, and I looked dead at her, "And where do you fall in that order?"

"I'm the second oldest." I looked for her approval to continue, and she caught my drift and nodded her head. I started talking again. "I live with my grandparents."

Even though I did not look her straight in the eyes or even anywhere near her face as I spoke, I periodically glanced over at her and as I said that, as I figured it would, her facial expression changed. Before I could think of anything else to say she threw another question in my direction.

"Why don't you live with your mother?"

A question I always regretted being asked. An answer much more difficult to explain than it sounds. "We were taken away from her when I was eight, and my grandparents adopted me and my older sister."

She nodded. "So do you know why?"

An even harder question than the one before. "There are different stories, but as I know she was supposed to be going to the grocery store and left us in the house by ourselves and came back too late."

The story doesn't make much sense to me. I mean we should not have been taken away just from that. So I know there are things I don't know or that I do know but haven't quite figured the situation out yet. I'm sure Ms. Sherral wondered as well if there was more to the story.

"You said there are five kids and two are with a grandmother. Where are the rest of them?" she asked. I noticed she takes amazing mental notes.

"They are adopted by another grandmother."

I felt like I was violating a family secret by telling all of my business. Especially since I'm a very private person, this all seemed so wrong. Then at the same time this was a subject I knew was going to float on the water. I just thought my rock holding it under was a little stronger. We talked for a while, here and there touching the subject of my mother. Now that I think back Ms. Sherral has a way of indirectly asking a question but still getting her answer. All of which I was aware she was doing, I just chose to give in and answer them anyways. Once again I thought to myself, "She is going to tell me her biggest secret, so why not."

Five and five, everything's the same. I'm one of five children; Ms. Sherral has five children. My mother has three girls and two boys; Ms. Sherral has three girls and two boys. Take one from each situation and you get a mother and a daughter from different places both trying to figure out the life laid before them, and even the life they've lived in the past.

Going back to the day I was first introduced to this project, I remember my thoughts and actions. After getting all the information we needed and talking a little more, the meeting was over, and I went to my next class. I'm guessing by how much the "new project" stayed on my mind throughout the rest of the day that I was apprehensive. I honestly thought that I was going to meet some hardcore women from prison. By the sound of their names I thought they were all white. This was a bit racist and prejudice-mental, but when you're stepping foot into a new situation, your mind has a mind of its own. I expressed my apprehension to no one, no one at all. No particular reason, I just didn't really express personal thoughts to anyone. I was not necessarily scared of people's opinions or anything; well that's a whole other story in the making.

Once I arrived at the church and went through the complications of trying to get inside, I was about to come face to face to with what I've been calling the Iroc project. I walked into the room and was shocked. All African American women were seated before me.

"Everybody this is Briane," Ms. Kathy introduced me to the women, and I apologized for being late. Tareian and Quynh arrived together, and we were walking up to the meeting room. I confessed my biggest secret about this whole project.

"Tareian, I thought all of them were going to be white, but they're black. They all are black." Tareian just laughed as I continued to whisper more of my secrets. "And they don't even look like prisoners. They look like regular people."

What did regular people look like? Better yet what or who was a regular person? Right then and there I proved my own theory. People prejudice things in life based on what they hear, or what they simply imagine. Prejudgment is never right, and as corny as it sounds, I wouldn't want anyone to do it to me. I take that back. I know how it feels to be judged before anyone even gets to know you. Back in the 7th grade a lot of my classmates thought of me as bougie and uptight. I don't know why or how they came to their assumptions, but I really do

not care to know how either. All people aren't like me though. Learning they have been prejudged both consciously and unconsciously really hurts them. As I write these words down, admitting to my faults, I think about how the women I'm working with will feel knowing that I came in open minded yet blind-fully ignorant.

The hardships of their lives were never considered. How they got into their predicament wasn't important. The only things that the world saw were women out of prison. No one cares to ask Why, Who, When, Where, or How. But then again they may just be like me, too afraid to raise their tongue and utter words that would get to be too much in people's personal lives. This go round I won't be afraid to ask questions. Starting with the question who are you; I'm learning all about Ms. Sherral.

Before Ms. Sherral and I go into the details and try to come to conclusions as to why I don't favor my mother, I try to question myself first. Society generally says don't let people's past affect you, but it's kind of hard not to. People say forgive and if possible forget, but it's kind of hard when every day the past is facing you. Not the person particularly but the mistakes the person has made.

Every day I try to figure out why I haven't found "love" and why I don't have a boyfriend. Then I think maybe it's because I try so hard not to become my mother that I'm only hurting myself. Admittedly she has let men violate her in ways I would rather not know of, and I don't want to end up the same way. So I avoid men; I push them away. I never allow them to get the chance to know me. I see the stuff they pull over these girls, breaking their hearts and spilling their beans. I hear words I would rather not hear about myself, words I won't allow to be said about me. So I don't allow myself to be vulnerable. I stay closed behind these walls, not even allowing my grandparents to walk in the door that the wall holds up. My grandparents don't know something's wrong. My smile is my mask. But if you look into these eyes that never look you in yours, you will see the despair on the surface of my cornea. Yes it's that close to the surface. Sometimes I think being so closed up may lead me to not getting help at all with all these feelings inside, and maybe that's a bad thing. But I don't know. Is my long road to finding a friend and finding relief deeper than what I can imagine? It most likely is. In fact I know it is. It all began with the simple fact that I did not have my mother in my life.

I wonder if Ms. Sherral's children experienced the same thing. Do they feel alone, neglected, like their mother owes them something? Do they try hard not to end up like their mother, and since they're older, make it a point to never not be in their children's lives? I wonder if their relationships were hindered likewise. How long did it take them to adjust to the life without their mother? I guess these are all questions only her children can answer. Even if they are willing to answer, so much goes behind the life of a child being raised without a mother and they may be as private as me and not want to tell their story. They may be too afraid of judgment, and in some ways I am. The question I asked Ms. Sherral was if she felt like she owed her children anything. The question derived from listening to Ms. Mena, a woman who has also been incarcerated and had children who were raised without her in their lives. Ms. Mena's daughter used her. Ms. Mena's daughter wanted everything from her. She felt that since she was only two months when her mother was incarcerated and had to grow up without any memorable experiences, Ms. Mena owes her the world.

Ms. Sherral said, "I don't feel that I owe them anything. No, they do not try to use me. I feel that when I gave them birth, and 24 of my genes that were of the best, I gave them all they needed. They are beautiful, articulate, clever, independent adults. My youngest daughter, who was four months old when I left her, said that she feels that I should be more focused on her, since she was so young and did not get to spend any quality time with me. She is angry because I did not comply with her request."

I smiled because I've never heard someone explain giving their children everything by giving them 24 of her genes. With that explanation I wonder if I'm wrong for shutting my mother out. But I know I won't change. I've been this way too long. I don't feel like she owes me anything, but I don't feel like I will speak to her though.

In the latest IROC meeting Ms. Sherral suggested I ask her children the questions I had implied. It was an idea I was willing to take part in. I was curious. I wanted to know if they were experiencing or if they had experienced some of the same things I am, and if so what did they do to get over it. She gave me the names and email addresses of two of her children, both girls. I was anxious and nervous at the same time. I didn't know if these people were going to let me into their life. If they were going to tell me the experiences they faced as a child and/or adult. But I was too determined to not ask and contact them. I forwarded an email to both of the girls: Monica, the oldest, and Elizah, Ms. Sherral's fourth born. Both had previously agreed to answer my questions and help me with my research, so I was excited to send them an email. I sent them the same questions written in my essay along with an introduction of myself. I patiently waited two long days, and Monica, as I mentioned before the oldest, replied to my email. She said;

Hello Briane,

My name is Monica oldest daughter of Sherral, I will try and answer your questions to the best of my ability and hope it is helpful to you.

Being without a mother for so many years, yes it did make me feel alone and neglected, and I felt like when I was younger yes she owed me everything for leaving me alone. As I got older I start to see things differently.

No one ever wants to end up in trouble or spending a long period of time in jail away from their children, so yes I try to avoid being taken away from my children.

Yes it does hinder your relationship, because you get used to living life without a mother.

It took me about 4 years to adjust to life without a mother.

Reading her email confirmed my beliefs, and it made me realize that I'm not the only one going through these experiences and feelings. Though Elizah never replied, I felt that Monica helped me so much just by simply answering the email. I would have preferred that Elizah did answer because it would have given me another point of view because all people are different, and all people experience things differently. By me deeply believing that people are different and they handle the same circumstances differently, I plan ask to my counselor some questions. I just need the right questions and the perfect timing to ask him. He can get pretty busy at times.

Mr. Dauphin, the counselor at McMinn High School, was the person everyone talked to when they had no one else to talk to. So I knew he could help me, and I knew he would be honest with everything he told me. Though I have not spoken to Mr. Dauphin about any of the situations I've been going through, I trusted him, and after all I said it before and I'll say it again. I rather talk to someone who is also confiding in me.

We sat down in his office, and I explained my purpose for being there.

"I need to ask you something. In Mr. Randels' class a couple of us have begun a project with previously incarcerated women. The project is called IROC, and with IROC we have the chance to experience something new. The women that we are working with are beyond amazing. They are willing to share their stories with complete strangers, and I'm honestly happy I'm a part of the project. Most of the women are mothers, and they had their children before they went to prison. So circumstantially their children grew up without a mother in their lives. Upon being released from prison they attempted to re-enter their children's lives, and many of them were rejected. From your experience how do children handle and develop when they have to grow up without a mother?"

He sat and listened to all of my babbling and answered my question to what he said was "the best of his ability."

- The kids generally feel abandoned, angry, disappointed. They often make bad decisions when it comes to relationships. A lot of times how a child bases a relationship is from their mother, and without that key source they don't know where to go to find love. They are socially retarded.
- The ones who are more mixed in the midst of forgiving and reluctance, they use that source to better themselves in life. They use whatever their mother did as an example of what not to do. It gives them a drive in life and determination to succeed.
- The kids are raised by grandparents or extended family.
- The ones who are fully reluctant don't do well in school or social environments. Sometimes they even end up being incarcerated themselves.

I took notes as Mr. Dauphin told me everything he could tell me. The further he went into discussion, the more I thought to myself "he's good." He described me more and more with every word that came out of his mouth, and I couldn't believe it. Truth is I'm socially retarded, and secretly I had just been diagnosed. My last question for Mr. Dauphin was "In these predicaments, is there a certain way you address these children in order to help them?"

He said, "With the ones who are having a hard time you teach them to deal with disappointed feelings and try to get them out of the victim mentality, because it's hard to succeed in life when one feels they are always the victim and they must know that."

He felt that it was a bigger job to help the ones who are reluctant. So he mainly talked about how to help them. I told him I would come back if I ever thought of any more questions, and I left his office.

From my personal interviews, to emailing Ms. Sherral's daughter, to surfing the internet for clues about incarcerated women, this project has opened a whole new world, a world that has hope through the judgment, the pain, and through the wonder. I can honestly imagine myself taking this project further than just the classroom. I may even consider doing so. But for now I've learned so much, and I know I still have more to learn. I'm so grateful to have been a part of the IROC project. I think anyone would be as grateful. So into my notes and my diary this writing goes, and I will continue to add to it. Who knows? Maybe even by the time I'm graduating college I will have a book. You never know what the future may hold, because indeed "The Lord Works in Mysterious Ways."

INCARCERATION WITH AVRELL

BY TAREIAN KING

Criminal: The dictionary simply defines the word as a person who has committed a crime. The government and society have their own perspectives of what it means to be a criminal. To be immoral. Wrong. To be a felon. To be unlawful. Once you commit a crime, the government and society associate you with all negative aspects of life. They label individuals as criminals and forget that they are humans. Who are we as humans? 1) We are not perfect. 2) We are immoral. 3) We make mistakes. Judges who have the ability to tell someone she will receive 365 years in jail are human beings. They prove that they are human when they wrongly incarcerate people. They prove that they are human when they boast about their power and authority. They prove that they are humans when they begin looking at the individuals who come before them as being unequal. They let the "your honors" boost them so high that they feel as if they are no longer mortal. If a person is found guilty and convicted of a felony, his or her human existence is denied. As granted by the 13th amendment they are brought back to slavery.

The 13th amendment states: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States or any place subject to its jurisdiction.” Serving a sentence in prison is only the beginning. In Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, she states, “Once you’re labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal. As a criminal you have scarcely more rights and arguably less respect than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow” (2).

Criminal Justice has always been a passion in my heart. My father was incarcerated for second degree murder when I was little. I was a daddy’s girl, and my life was deeply affected by his incarceration. While he was in jail, writing was our only communication considering the fact the phone calls weren’t that long. This is how I started writing. It has now become a gift of mine. When Mr. Randels, my English instructor, informed me that SAC would be publishing a book on incarceration, as a project with another SAC partner, Artspot Productions, I was excited. I thought about all the ideas I wanted to attack basically exposing the weakness of the system. I had already begun working with Jerome Morgan, an individual who has been wrongly incarcerated for 18 years at Angola. The idea of working with women who were formerly incarcerated excited me. It meant so much to me to see that the women were free. I didn’t have to write them, as if they were caged up animals. They were human, and they were free. They no longer lived in the walls of prison. Words can’t explain how much it meant to me that they were free. My emotional response to hearing their stories and my emotional response to writing this paper remind me that this is a subject that I am passionate about. It brings sorrow to my heart, because I am not sure if I will ever be able to sit next to Jerome Morgan without him having shackles on his feet and chains on his arms. I am not sure if he will ever have the opportunity to sit his human body in a church and work with students. This is part of the reason why it meant so much to me that the women were free. They may have criminal records, and face discrimination, but they are free and I loved all of them the first day I met them. The love I have for the women is unconditional. Their stories, their guilt, their mistakes, will never break our bonds. I will never label them as a “criminal!”

I received a lesson from all of the women. Ms. Sherral, Ms. Mona Lisa, Ms. Willemena, and Ms. Avrell, but I was assigned to work with Ms. Avrell. Her story stood out to me because she was a daddy’s girl and her father impacted her life. I felt as if it was a personal connection. On the day we talked on the phone I realized the connection was stronger than our relationships with our fathers. This lady, whom society may look at as a criminal, is one of the sweetest women I have ever met! She has an open heart, and she was willing to put her life on the table for the world to know. After conversing, she quickly asked “When is your prom? Do you need anything? What about shoes? I can buy your shoes.” I had only known her for a few weeks, and there she was eager to assist my family financially in any manner needed. I was deeply touched by this. Benevolent, high-minded, willing, great-hearted, bounteous, and generous are words that describe her. We planned for Ms. Avrell to purchase my shoes for prom. She called me one day after school to see was I available to go shopping for them. I told her how the outcome of getting my dress made was not as expected, and I really did not want to go due to my disappointment. Before I knew it, she was calling her friends to see what she could do. The end result was I attended prom. Ms. Avrell had her friend fix my dress for me. She had to buy more material and did not have a problem with it. She even took me to the fabric store the same day to pick out my material. What “criminal” do you know, who would make this type of sacrifice?

I thought about what Ms. Avrell had told me about her incarceration in depth. I also did some research. It’s crazy how people are incarcerated for drugs that the government once upon a time brought to black neighborhoods. Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* states:

The CIA admitted in 1998 that guerrilla armies it actively supported in Nicaragua were smuggling illegal drugs into the United States—drugs that were making their way onto the streets of inner-city black

neighborhoods in the form of crack cocaine. The CIA also admitted that, in the midst of the War on Drugs, it blocked law enforcement efforts to investigate illegal drug networks that were helping to fund its covert war in Nicaragua. (6)

In 1998 the government was providing drugs for blacks and incarcerating them for those same drugs. Ms. Avrell had a drug charge for cocaine and distribution of heroin. She was found guilty on the cocaine charge, and a verdict was not able to be reached on the distribution of heroin charge. A flag went up when she told me she was sentenced under the heroin charge. Her bail bond was set at half a million dollars. Oppression is what I thought. This was not done by accident, and it wouldn't be the first time when blacks who are arrested are given bonds that they cannot afford. It is found that drug charges cause high bail bonds. How can a judge set a bail that she knows a person cannot pay? It is not done by accident. Judge Bruce Wright is a Black judge who was removed from the criminal court bench in New York because he was too fair and honest, and he did something that was unforgivable—he set poor people's bail at amounts they could afford to pay. The courts will never be anything but a tool of repression until there are judges like Bruce Wright presiding over Black people's trials (*Assata* 246).

I became curious about Ms. Avrell's arrest and she took no time to tell me everything that happened. She informed me that a friend of hers, Bryan, was busted for selling drugs to an undercover cop. That sentence is a life sentence, but the criminal justice system we have is fond of influencing people who are arrested and are facing serious time to give up information for a lesser sentence. In this case, her friend gave the police ten names and was rewarded with \$10,000. Among those names was Ms. Avrell. It's crazy how the justice system can turn a child against a child, a friend against a friend, and a sister against a brother. These bribes should not be legal. They are morally wrong. They use the adjectives immoral, wrong, and unlawful to describe "criminals," when these are the words that describe the criminal justice system. There is no truth in the system, and the majority of the time, there is no justice. "It is not what happened; it is what you can prove." The "What happens" in this statement is the truth, but in society the evidence is looked at as the truth. This is not good because the police have the resources for technology that can make evidence in their favor. Police and FBI agents obtain the technology to turn the face of a white woman who lives in Canada to the face of a slave in Africa. They have the skills to make the truth what they want the truth to be and they have the support of the system. This is not justice. Taking advantage of technology for corruption is not truth.

Ms. Avrell informed me that in the type of case she had when one is accused you have to face the accuser. Bryan was killed. There was no facing him, and there were no technology skills that they could use to bring him back to life. The people whose names he had given were arrested in Orleans Parish were set free, while those in Jefferson Parish remained incarcerated. Another flag went up. Why weren't these people released? What about their rights? Jefferson Parish didn't care about their rights or them being human. Being human isn't the only thing the criminal justice system does not care about. It does not care about the children of those human beings who are serving time in prisons. It does not care about how their lives or how my life was affected. It does not care that their "justice" can ruin a relationship between a mother and her children. It does not know what it's like to be caged up and miss out on motherhood because you are incarcerated, because you are human, and you made a mistake. It does not care whether or not your children die on those streets. It's fair enough that you do the crime, you do the time, but who said the time has to be so long?

What human has the right to give another human a life sentence, a lethal injection? What human has the right to make that decision? Who decided when a black person kills a police officer that person gets life in prison, harsh treatment, and/or lethal injection, but when a black is killed by a police, that officer roams the street until there is enough evidence? They are free. The policemen who killed Wendell Allen and Justin Sipp in New Orleans, Louisiana are free and still working!! The "law" supposedly says that people are innocent until proven guilty, Black citizens are treated as if they are guilty until proven innocent. What human reached that

conclusion? What morals was the conclusion based on? Why does guilty until proven innocent apply to some and not others? When the government finds it convenient to follow its own laws and administrative procedures, it does. And when it finds that these same laws are inconvenient for its own purposes, it simply ignores them (*Assata* 244). It breaks its own laws without consequences, but once citizens break those same laws they got to jail or face death. Ms. Avrell was arrested in 2001 and was not sentenced until 2003. Guilty until proven innocent was practiced in her case. Those were three years she could have experienced motherhood with her son. Those were three years she could have been there with her child. Those were three years that she could have told him and taught him about the streets of New Orleans. Those were three years she could have informed him about the crooked criminal justice system Louisiana has, but instead she was serving time in prison for those three years. She was treated unlike George Zimmerman, the self-appointed security guard who killed Trayvon Martin and got away with it, or the police officers who killed Justin Sipp and Wendell Allen and walked the streets of New Orleans for months before being arrested. The government is looking at their employees as innocent and will do everything in its power to hide what happened or deny what happened because these are people that work for their corrupt system.

It bothers me that there is a possibility that these men who work for the government and have committed crimes can be found innocent. It bothers me that they can be found innocent on a charge of which they are guilty, when citizens like Ms. Avrell have to serve the dedicated years for the crime. If proven innocent, they will have the opportunity to sleep all hours of the day while Ms. Avrell had to work in the field from seven a.m. to three p.m. planting and picking food in the hot climate for no pay just like her ancestors—our ancestors—slaves. If they are found innocent, they will have their entire lifetime to see their family and spend time with them, while Ms. Avrell lost time she could have been spending with her father who died one year after her release. Yet she is mentally free. While they are facing the chances of getting killed and being imprisoned, Ms. Avrell is working with students like myself and making a difference in our lives and the world. She is at peace with herself and her life. She is married and does not have to worry about being disconnected from her family ever again. She has changed for the best and is a strong black woman. Never again will she go down the wrong path, and thanks to her sharing her story with me, I know where that path can get you, and I know not to take it. This woman whom the government and society labeled as a criminal is now a loved one of mine. She can teach me things that I cannot find in a book. We have bonded and are each other's support system in a relationship that is unbreakable, a relationship that no police officer, prison, or drugs can destroy. I have accepted her as being a human being. We are all humans. We all make mistakes and can learn lessons the hard ways. This does not make us criminals. It makes us human.

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UNTITLED BY JOURDAN RILEY

I am one of the few female students at McMain working with a group of women who were introduced to us through ArtSpot Productions. It's interesting working with Ms. Avrell who is a part of this group dedicated to voicing the stories of formerly incarcerated women. She is one of the youngest among the women. I asked Ms. Avrell how she was brought up. She said that, unlike her friends, she had both of her parents. They were strict. Whenever she and her siblings wanted to go out, they had to have a ride there and back home. They always went to church, and they were very close knit. I also asked Ms. Avrell if this could have been a factor in

pushing her towards drugs, the charge that got her put in St. Gabriel for five years. Not surprisingly at all, her answer was yes.

Sometimes I wonder what it is that parents think about when they think about discipline. So I looked it up: “Many parents go through their children’s teenage years with trepidation, fearing that danger is lurking around every corner. . . . As a result, they clamp down hard when it comes to setting rules on curfews, parties and dating, driving, money, even music and friends.” (The Corner House Student Board)

So, I guess you can say it’s sometimes understood that when there are too many restrictions, the child acts out. So, how are Ms. Avrell and I alike? Just like her parents were strict, so are my mom and stepdad. I even asked my mom some questions on “being strict.” She said, “It works because it sets boundaries on what’s acceptable and what’s not; as a child, as well as an adult, rules exist everywhere.” She had rules and chores too. She had to do them, no questions asked. Did she think about rebelling? Did Ms. Avrell? Did she start to suffocate under their overprotective eyes? Because it’s beginning to feel like I am. I even start to think along the lines of sneaking out or running away. Maybe if I act out, I will get my parents’ attention. Or maybe the leashes will just tighten. I mean, I’m not a bad child. I don’t drink, smoke, have bad grades, or have sex. I’m not saying I’m perfect, but damn, can I have some room to breathe?

The thought takes a lap around my mind every now and then. But stories like Ms. Avrell’s turn me away. She turned to drugs and ended up in jail. I don’t want to end up like that. However, she is successful in raising her son, knowing that she doesn’t have to worry about him following in her footsteps. Ever since he was young, he didn’t like the neighborhood they were in; he didn’t want to be there and still does not. She went out and got a job only a week after her release in 2006 and has been working hard ever since. She has nothing to hide. She is not ashamed. She feels blessed. She IS blessed. Ms. Avrell is just another strong, female African American who hasn’t received any credit for what she has overcome, and it is long overdue. I don’t know how she dealt with her overbearing parents. It amazes me, and I wish I knew her secret. Everyone knows that people make mistakes. It’s only what makes us human. It’s what we learn from these mistakes that distinguishes a maturing adult from a child, but what helps parents distinguish the difference of that said “child?”

Ms. Avrell is actually very nice. She’s open, and she’s a cool person, but how will I be assured that my outcome will be the same as hers, forgiving and moving forward? Even in John Wideman’s memoir *Brothers and Keepers*, Robby went astray and was wanted by the police. Were his parents overprotective, pushing him to the edge?

It’s taking everything in me to stay off the wrong path, but the thought of doing so still remains. How the hell am I supposed to be a teenager, learn from my mistakes, if I’m not given the chance to?

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MY STORY

BY SAT GRANT

During the most important days and years of my life my mother was incarcerated in St. Gabriel prison. It was my first year of high school; I didn’t expect for her to mess up. She was a great mother and until this day she is still the best. My mama always talked to me. Y’all know that mother daughter talk when your mama ask you what are you going to do when you finish school and when you give her an answer she asks “what do you want

to be in life?” No matter how many times she asks, you always say you want to be something different. At least I know I changed my mind a lot. In high school I was on mostly every team, just to see what was going to fit me. I was on the track, softball, dance and cheerleading team. When I performed or played in a game, nobody never was there. They weren’t at a game, parade, track meet, prep rallies, nothing. My mama even missed my graduation, the BIGGEST stage of my life of growing. I know if she would’ve never messed up, she would’ve been there screaming and hollering. I just felt so left out. I’m my mother’s last child, and I always asked myself why she messes up when it’s the most important years of my life. I wish she could’ve just thought about that at first. I have so many medals and trophies, achievements and certificates I can’t even count them on my hands and feet. Everything I did, from the grades to being a better leader, I did it to make her proud. I had sad nights, times I hadn’t slept, days I cried all night. I hope my mother never will be far away from me ever again! To make the long story short she’s home now, but I just wish I could rewind all of it back for her, just so I can see her bright smile. I sent her pictures of all my events, but knowing I couldn’t see her smile hurt me even more. A mother is not like an aunt or sister. You can’t have more than one mother. I love my mother with my all, but how much I hated the feeling of her not being there. Although she was away, I still respected and loved her the same way.

“SURVIVING THE UNFAMILIAR TERRITORY: INCARCERATION”
A MONOLOGUE WITHIN *DO YOU SEE ME?*, A PRODUCTION BY THE
GRADUATES & ARTSPOT PRODUCTIONS
BY CARRY EMERSON

THE PRESENT

(Carry Emerson sits at a table working a puzzle.)

Carry: What a beautiful day, let’s see if I can get this puzzle finished. A six-letter word for jail. Okay, let me see. I’ve got it, PRISON. That fits and brings back memories of another place and another time.

(Carry stands up.) It all started on the day when I stood before the judge to hear my sentence for a crime I did commit!

THE SENTENCING

Sherral Kahey/Judge: Carry Emerson I sentence you to 12 years at The Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women.

(Carry stands not far from chair.)

Carry: Hearing those words conjured up a wealth of emotions and thoughts. Six years. Six years. That’s a long time for me when I’ve never been away from my husband or sons longer than an eight-hour workday. How would I survive without the familiar things I knew best around me? My family and friends, the barbecues with my brother in the backyard or just being able to do what I wanted when I wanted. I remembered the brother who had come to court with me today. Would I have time to say goodbye to him? I searched the courtroom, and our eyes met. He smiled and blew me a kiss, then put his hand over his heart. My heart sank at his gestures, and I quickly turned away.

(Carry moves Stage Right and points to the scene behind her.)

EAST BATON ROUGE PRISON

Carry: After court I was transported to East Baton Rouge Prison, “The Parish” as it is better known. Shackled, I was led inside. I noticed that the windows were barred and painted gray. Once inside you couldn’t tell it was

sunshine, raining, day or night. It smelled strongly of urine. I was fingerprinted and then led to a small room and told to disrobe. Disrobing usually meant an examination. This was not my doctor's office. I am more than sure that the person about to examine me is not my physician and the examination should not be done except by my physician. Nonetheless you adhere to orders given and endure. After the exam, I was given a set of clothing and shown to my bed. The bed was made of iron. Cold, hard unforgiving iron. The one blanket was thin and scratchy. I am always cold and wondered if I could ask for another blanket (*She turns to the ladies behind her who are behind bars. They just look at her, not moving*). I guess not, and they are not willing to share. Did I mention privacy? Well you can forget that. There is no door at the bathroom to close behind you. No shower curtain to pull while bathing. You are, as they say, "for the entire world to see." My objection was there were some who liked to look.

LCIW

Carry: Within a few months, I was transferred to LCIW, Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women. LCIW holds a little over a thousand women. The room assigned to me was for two ladies and there was a window I could actually see out of and the shower area had a curtain. Small things can make a difference. On my first night there, another inmate called out to my roommate:

Ernestine: Does your roommate play?

Carry: Not knowing what she meant, I turned to my roommate asking, "What is she talking about?" When she explained, I was pissed, that an assumption about me is made without even knowing me, that I could, would, might be a "player"? Well, I thought to myself let me set you and anyone else straight right now; I came to serve time not as another woman's girlfriend. That was my last encounter on that issue.

Then there was count time. Count time was an ordeal in itself. Count was taken 5:45am, 1pm, 5pm and again at 10pm.

Sherral/Security Officer: Count time, Count time, it is now Count time in all wings of Aquarius. Stand by your doors, name tags on, properly attired and remain standing until the count has been cleared, it is now Count time in all wings of Aquarius.

Carry: I don't know what all the counting was about. They escorted or watched you wherever you went. At work, school, eating. It often took them a couple of hours to clear count and count could not be cleared until all inmates were accounted for.

Sherral/Security Officer: Count clear.

Carry: In the early days of my journey through this territory, many asked "What are you doing here?" To me that was a stupid question. Did I miss the class where you were taught how to act or look like a prisoner? I wanted to yell out, "People I am one of you." I wear the shirt and pants with LCIW on it. I go and come as directed by security just like you. In the following months and years the question was asked of me less and less. I guess I acquired the prisoner look and since I hadn't left I must be one of them.

I found myself lonesome and thinking of home on many days in that unfamiliar territory. All days weren't easily dismissed, but instead of moping, being angry and wallowing in self-pity, I resolved to survive. I joined the LCIW choir and was allowed to travel to singing engagements. I joined the Drama Club and Toastmasters Club and participated in an 18-month class for Systems Technology in preparation for employment upon my release. (*She goes back to her chair.*)

BACK HOME, THE PRESENT

My faith, which was the greater part of my resolution, along with the activities, enabled me to endure and embrace the greater picture. My journey does not end in this territory. There will be new horizons. Because of strengths gained in this territory, I will be enabled to soar like an eagle with the wind beneath my wings. (*She goes back to her chair.*) I have come, I have conquered and OVERcome the unfamiliar territory.

(*Sherral hands Carry a rose to hold.*) Do you see me? Did you see how I swayed back and forth with the wind? Do you see me!!!

THE SITUATION – PART 2

**WRITING ON THE OUTSIDE: STUDENT AND TEACHER WRITINGS
ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX ON
NEW ORLEANS COMMUNITIES**

TEACHERS BEHIND BARS

BY ASHLEY JONES

My favorite piece of literature to teach is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The theme of friendship and the bond between two demigods as they battle each other, the outside world and their inner selves resonates with teenagers going through their own struggles of securing and maintaining friendships and carving out a self-identity. It is this theme that allows them to trust me in guiding them through a text that seems foreign to them. The Epic of Gilgamesh is often considered the oldest written story on Earth. As engaging and easily accessible the theme of friendship is for my students, it is the theme of becoming human that perplexes them, causes them to examine how they came to be and who helped them forge their own humanity. We pose two philosophical questions before reading the text: when did you become human? Can you be human alone? These questions force students to look critically at the events, processes and interactions that inform their ever-evolving worldview—their self-identity.

Whenever I ask my students to discuss the role that women play in bringing both Gilgamesh and Enkidu into the full spectrum of their humanness, that is when the deep work and often heated debates begin. Usually by the end of our journey through the text, most students—even the young men—agree on the essentialness of women in making the characters human. They also concede in their own essays that their mothers, sisters, aunts etc., have played in integral part of their own humanness. Women, they come to agree, are our first teachers, our healers, our language instructors, our dream interpreters, our culture carriers, and in the black community—the sole provider in most single-parent households.

In our SAC classes, where critical thinking is fostered by the deep study and engagement of issues that directly affect the lives of our students, talking, reading and writing about the incarcerated father figure has become customary. Almost every student has some personal experience with the incarceration of a male family and/or community member. This book is evidence of this. The essays, poems, story circles are plentiful. But no one hardly writes about their mother being in jail or prison.

Incarcerated mothers are not that common in the classes that I have taught, but I have encountered a handful of students whose mothers were incarcerated as we were discussing the long, sordid history of prison as a means of curtailing black freedom post slavery. Not one of those students would mention their mothers. I would usually find out at a parent/teacher conference. An aunt or grandparent would pull me aside and in hushed tones, brief me on the incarcerated mother. Their eyes carrying shame; their voices burdened with guilt, weariness, and defeat. No student has dared to speak of their mother being behind bars. That is, all but one. He was in my ninth-grade reading class. He came in the middle of the school year. His reputation preceded him. My students even thought it necessary to warn me of his arrival to my class. His sandy colored locks bounced against his cherub-like cheeks and dangled over his too-red eyes.

It didn't take him long to participate in class. He liked the freedom that students have in our SAC classes. Initially it was difficult getting him to write anything on paper. He was more comfortable telling stories and sharing his experiences. This was no problem for our class; story circles are an integral part of the SAC pedagogy. When it was his turn to share his experiences with jail, he mentioned his own stints in the juvenile correctional system, the recent killing of his younger brother, the brother who would be behind bars for a long time and the much-anticipated release of his mother from prison. I asked him what he anticipated most and he told me in that typical New Orleans sing-song way of speaking. "I miss huggin' that lady, Ms. Ashley." Surprisingly, everyone else was silent. There was no barrage of inquiries, no request to go deeper with his story, no incredulous looks, no one tried to joke or make light of the situation. In our SAC classes, our students hold each other's stories and texts to high standards. Interrogations, well-placed suggestions of improvement, and thoughtful

critique seemed to be silenced by the gravity pulling at the hearts and imaginations of all in the room. I guess they were trying to imagine what it would feel like to have their mothers behind bars.

My first and only experience with incarcerated women was through SAC and ArtSpot Productions, a theatre company and long-time collaborator. Kathy, the founder of ArtSpot Production, had been traveling to St. Gabriel to do theatre work with the women of the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women. SAC students came along to document the experience and help to facilitate story circles. This was years ago. I vaguely remember the stories these women shared with us. I vaguely remember the crimes committed or the beige room with chairs or benches where we worked with them. I do remember being struck with a sense of familiarity. Their laughter, the warm disposition they displayed as they spoke of their journeys, the mothering they gave us. I saw my aunts and cousins in many of these women. I saw my own mother and grandmother. Despite what they did to get there, what I recognized was their humanness and the natural inclination that women have to teach and nurture.

Over the last 15 years, there has been increased scrutiny of America's prison systems. In books and articles the focus has been on the disproportionate number of black men behind bars and the history of institutionalized racism that continues to strengthen this trend. I know first-hand the hardships that having a male family member behind bars presents to families. I see the financial and emotional strain that it puts on the families of the teens that I teach. The scrutiny and struggle to end mass incarceration is critical and important. However, the experiences of incarcerated women and the particular burden of their absences in their homes and society is often overlooked.

According to the article "Women's Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2019," of the 219,000 women incarcerated in America, 80% are mothers and most likely the primary caregiver of their children. Of those in jail, 60% sitting behind bars and separated from their families have not been convicted and are awaiting trial. The financial and emotional burden is immediate as most incarcerated women have lower incomes than incarcerated men, with black women having a median annual income of around \$9,013.¹¹⁶ This means that families already struggling to make ends meet plummet rapidly toward even more debilitating poverty.

So, what happens to the children of these women? The level of stress and trauma has very real social-emotional and cognitive consequences for the youth and teens who find themselves looking for the financial support and emotional stability of relatives who are ill-equipped to deal with the extra monetary and emotional constraint that comes with taking care of an incarcerated relative and children. Even keeping a connection costs, as both the incarcerated and their families are hit with ever increasing high phone bills. Critical connections are severed. And it doesn't just hurt the individual families of these women, most of whom are incarcerated for non-violent offenses like drug abuse. As a society, we lose the people who are most likely to care for physically or mentally disabled members of their families. The whole family structure breaks down. Society suffers. Families suffer. Children suffer. And teens—they bring the despair, the anger, the sadness and the sense of abandonment with them to class.

That student stopped coming to my class. The rumor was that he was serving another stint in a juvenile detention facility. I was never able to confirm this, but I was sad to see him go despite the open relief of some teachers and students.

We would often talk in private after class. We talked about many things. The last conversation was about a baby he said was on the way and his new focus that he had to do better. I never hugged him, at least not in the physical sense. My support came from the encouragement I tried to give him and the time I would devote

¹¹⁶ Aleks Kajstura, "Women's Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2019," *Prison Policy Initiative*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2019women.html>.

during my planning just to talk to him. On his way out of the door, he told me he loved me. It struck me. He said it in the almost cursory way we say it to a relative before leaving their presence. Before I could react, he closed the door and I never saw him again. Here was a young man who put fear in many at the school. Even I witnessed him nearly choke another boy out. His anger seemed uncontrolled, always bubbling at the surface. His living situation was unstable and no one really looked after him. I thought back to how much he said he missed his mother's hugs and realized that beyond the very real need to have physical contact with the woman that birthed him, he was missing tenderness and compassion. He was missing the ability to be vulnerable without the fear of being perceived as weak. His anger and violence was a facade, a toxic veneer of masculinity meant to stop anyone from recognizing that he was missing something, someone, deep. Like Gilgamesh, with all his fear inducing brawn, my student was not fully human. I'm not sure where this young man is today, but I hope his arms are wrapped tightly around his mother and that they are both finding ways to become whole, to restore whatever humanness was lost in her absence.

CHAPTER FOUR: MS. RADDING'S THIRD GRADE CLASS

INTRODUCTION

BY REBECCA RADDING

This year was my first teaching third graders (and my first teaching writing). Over the course of the year, the kids responded to a variety of prompts in their journals each night for homework. These prompts were always related to their lives, thoughts, and opinions and were designed to elicit stories. As students shared their stories, a character emerged that I had not expected: Jail. Whether writing in response to a question such as “Who do you miss?” or sharing their answers to the questions “Who has let you down?” or “What makes you angry?” Jail emerged as a protagonist, an antagonist, a monster, and a neighbor. I shared this observation with Catherine Michna, and she suggested that I ask my students to write more specifically about their relationship to jail. When I introduced the assignment, I asked my students to raise their hands if someone they loved was in jail. In all three of my classes, nearly all of my students had hands in the air. I made the assignment optional, offering it as an alternative journal prompt for those students who wanted to contribute to the book. I told them that I knew that some of them either wouldn't have personal experiences to contribute, or weren't yet at a place where it felt safe to write about their experiences. For those that wanted to write, though, I posed the question: “How has jail affected your life?” The students who contributed submitted drafts, which they revised and shared with Ashley and Gernine during and after school workshop. These are their stories.

MY GRANDFATHER

BY TORRY BOYD

Eight years ago when I was two, a man shot my grandfather. This is how it started. A man was beating up my grandmother so my grandfather defended her. The man got beat up so he left. The next day he came to my grandmother's house. My grandfather answered the door. I heard a big noise. I waited then I saw blue and red colors and noises so I came to the door and I saw the ambulances, and I went in the back of the truck with my grandma, and they did not let me see who was under the white sheet bleeding. So my grandmother told me when she came down from the room my grandfather was in...she said, “Somebody died that you loved a lot.” I said, “Who?” She said, “You will find out.”

Two weeks later my grandma made me wear a tuxedo. So we rode across the river and saw my grandfather lying down in a casket. I said, “Why is he sleeping without breathing?” because I didn't know much. My grandmother told me he was dead. I cried in the limo.

The man who shot him went to jail. Now I saw him on the news. His name was William Gankenster. A few months later his own grandfather got shot. They showed it on the news. I heard the pastor say, “Let me say his grandchildren's names.” He said, “Tomas Dester, Tobin Gankenster, and William Gankenster.” I told my grandmother, “That's the one who shot my grampa, and his grampa died.” My grandmother said, “What goes around comes back around, and I live my life.”

UNTITLED

BY SANYA VAUGHN

My story starts like this. My dad died in 2010. Before he died, he and my mom were broken up. They were still engaged, even though they broke up. My mom had no interest in my dad. When I was two years old my dad went to jail. I went to visit him when he was in jail every other Saturday. A year and a half later he came home.

One thing I loved about my dad was he kept us safe. One day someone was following us and my dad got out of the car and said, "Why are you following us? I have a baby and my baby mama in the car and I will do everything for them so come here punk." And the man drove away. I was a baby then.

When I was 5, my mom told me that he died. You might ask me how he died. I will not give you a cliffhanger. He got shot 10 minutes after I got off the phone with him. When I went to the hospital they wouldn't let me go upstairs and see him because I was too young and he was in the ICU. They took a picture of him and he was attached to tubes up in his nose and throat. My grandmother cut some of his dreads off and gave them to me. He died five hours after he got to the hospital.

The guy who shot him actually got shot years later in 2014. The trick about that is that the shooter got shot on my grandmother's block. That is what he gets for shooting someone's dad and child. Yes, my dad had a mom and dad like everyone else. I had a mom and dad, and now I only have a mom.

So let's get right back to my story. It is hard not having a dad in my life. So my mom gave my dad a wonderful memorial service. It was very sad. I was wearing a lime green dress because at the time that was me and my dad's favorite color. My mom and I sat in the 5th row because my dad's mom was acting so ugly with us.

After the service I did not go to the place where he was buried. I went home. At my house there was a guy named Clarence Green, who was my mom's fiancée. He said, "As long as your dad is dead I will be there for you." As years went on, him and my mom got married. It was a nice wedding. My mom had a nice blue dress.

We lived one happy year together and then he went to jail for something he did not do. It was the biggest mistake of his life. He has been in for 2 years, and this year it will make 3. It is even harder because I do not have a father figure: no one to ride my dirt bike, or teach me about boys. But that's okay, I will see him again and share a new life. That is my story.

MY GREAT MIRACLE

BY LESTER ARNAUD IV

When family members go to jail you feel sad. Did you ever feel that way? Well, I have. My mom was crying for when my cousin named DJ shot somebody and he went to jail. This is a question everybody was telling me, "Why?" Well, this is why cousin DJ shot somebody. I don't know how, but I do know that he didn't have a reason to. DJ was okay because the woman he shot was not armed. He wasn't hurt, but going to jail was enough punishment.

I'm going to tell the whole story right here. DJ got out of jail 1 day before my sister's birthday. I'm not sure if it was 1 day before my sister's birthday but let's just say that I'm happy he got out of jail. Well, back to the

story. Before DJ got out of jail, I prayed to God, "Please, my dear o Lord, please let cousin DJ get out of jail." Everybody thought that demons controlled him. But I know he was just acting crazy. I know it was a mistake.

In October my mom told me that everybody believed in miracles. Well, I was hoping that statement was true. My auntie (who was DJ's mom) went to court and the judge said DJ was guilty. When my auntie, Mae Mae, went and told everybody DJ was guilty we all went home quietly.

I said I hope that statement about miracles was true. Well, guess what? DJ probably spent 4 years in prison. I think he came out after a perfect amount of time and knows the consequences. So I was happy that he finally had freedom again.

HOW HAS JAIL AFFECTED YOUR LIFE

BY AMAYIEH DAVIS

My cousin, Papa, went to jail. He went to jail because he stole a car. I don't know why he did it. Perhaps, he did not have a car. My great grandmother wants him out of her house so bad. He acts like a little kid. When we visit her she is always fussing at him. She says, "Watch, I'm going to call the police and you will go right where you belong." Then he says, "No Mama please!"

I don't think my grandmother, Sarah, can take it anymore. He is always asking for my grandmother's phone. The car he stole was my grandmother's car. Everyone was talking about it. Some people were sad and some were okay. I don't know how I felt about it. Maybe a little bit sad.

But someone who went to jail that I know is Papa. It's hard to believe he's my cousin because I'm so sweet and he's so not.

THE DAY MY MOM WENT TO JAIL!

BY GE'NIYA BRUMFIELD

Somebody in my family that was in jail was my mom. She forgot her friend's baby in the car and he got burnt. I didn't know because the rest of us went to a restaurant. The food was spicy. I had crawfish. Then my mom passed out and the ambulance came and got my mom. Then my auntie Keishel saw him in the middle of the living room on the carpet. Then his mom came and she was like, "What did you do Genee?" Then she started crying.

Ever since my mom had to go to court. My grandma's friend Betty Davis watched us. Then my mom went to jail. I was upset then that Sunday morning we went to church and my family went to church with me. I was singing in the choir like always.

She was supposed to get out of jail in a year and 6 months but she got out in November. We were at church and when she walked through those doors I was about to faint. But I didn't. I kept running and when I got there I gave her a big hug.

JAIL

BY BROOKLYN THORNTON

This is my story...my mom went to jail. I felt like EXPLODING!!! My life wasn't the same after that. She stayed there for 2 years. You want to know what happened? Alright, I'll tell you.

She got in a car accident and her seatbelt wasn't on. My mom's best friend was in the car and died. Then she went to court. They said guilty. Then she went to jail. She had friends like me. One of her roommates got out early.

When she was in jail, I called her most of the time. When I would go see her the grandmother on her side took me to see her. We visited and talked. We brought money to have snacks there like candy and popcorn. They also had drinks like root beer and Coke. My mom and I mostly got Coke. When I got bored I got out the crayons and coloring sheets. She would color me a picture and I would color her a picture.

My mom got out April 13, 2011 (but she lives in Baton Rouge so I still don't get to see her very often). I miss my mom so much and hope to see her soon.

OUR BROTHER

BY TAYLOR AND CHELSEA MARKS

Taylor:

I miss my brother Josh who's in jail. I bet he's having a hard time. On Tuesday night I called him and he said that he misses me. I wonder what they do at jail. I hope he didn't get hurt. I really hope he's fine. I just hope he comes home!

I'm scared now.

He went to jail by stealing a car.

Be calm Taylor, be calm! I just want him to come home. I want him to come home in February.

Chelsea:

My oldest brother is 18 and in jail. At first I did not know. I am sad. He stole a car. Sometimes I say that was stupid. It was. I miss him so much. I did not get to see him in a long time. He does not live with me.

This is the same thing that happened with my dad before I was born. One time my 12-year-old brother told me about when my dad was in jail. He was going to see him and it was my mom's husband, which is my dad, so when they went to see my dad, my 12-year-old brother was like, stranger danger. That was when my brother was probably 4 or 5.

I miss my cousins. Their names are Shawanda, JD, Big Joe and lil Joe. They only come for summer break and funerals.

ANGER

BY SANAYA MICKEL

One person in my family went to jail. He went to jail because he had so much anger. And so he used the anger on a woman. I know he is going to come out of jail. And I can't wait for that day.

RUDE

BY DAJANAE HARRIS

One day my cousin Kentrell was being mean to her mother and father and she was trying to fight her parents and she broke her mother's new TV and she broke her computer and threw it out the window. So my auntie called the police and my cousin went to jail. My cousin is 18 years old being rude to her parents and she is still in jail so I hope she learn her lesson.

FIGHT

BY DORA SCOTT

One day, my Dad was beating someone up. But the other guy came with a tree branch to hit my Dad with. Then, the police came and sent that guy and my dad to jail. Then we got my dad out of jail. The cops took off the handcuffs. We got in the car and went home. I wanted the other guy to stay in jail forever. But he did not stay in jail forever. Someone took him out of jail. But I do not know who took him out of jail.

MY NEIGHBOR

BY BROOKLYN RICE

One day last week I was playing outside with my cousin and my dog. I heard a lot of police sirens. They sounded like they were headed my way. As we stood there waiting to see which way they were going we were very nervous and wondered what was going on. I couldn't believe my eyes...the police were going to the next door neighbor's house. They were there to pick up her brother. I couldn't imagine what he had done to go to jail. I asked his little sister, "Why was he being taken away?" She said she didn't know but it must've been something really bad. Then my friend began to cry because she wasn't gonna see him for a long time. From that day on we promised each other that we will never do anything to go to jail.

RESPONSE: MY VISIT WITH BEN FRANKLIN STUDENTS

BY GERNINE DORSEY

Before I went to visit with the students at Ben Franklin Elementary I wasn't expecting what I received. I expected little kids talking about things they heard their parents say. Boy was I wrong! Shocked is not a big enough word! The students I visited were well mannered and had an impressive vocabulary! These 3rd graders were using words I didn't learn until I was in middle school.

Okay so while at Ben Franklin Elementary School I read my story about my brother and got a lot of good feedback and a little criticism, but it was very helpful. It surprised me how much the kids were affected by the prison systems in their lives. One student lost her mother to the system and it hurt me to my heart, but she was still smiling—she was fine.

The stories that stuck out the most to me were the stories by two twin sisters. Their stories were about their brother who went to jail for stealing a car. They said they were mad at their brother, but they aren't any more. Their story stuck to me because my brother went to jail like theirs, and they are the exact age now that I was when my brother went to jail. Their stories made me think about how I felt when my brother first went to jail! I cried and was depressed, but those two girls smiled and said they had to forgive him because they loved him!

I went into this workshop thinking I can just go listen to some kids' stories not truly thinking I could get anything out of it. I got a lot out of it! Most of the third grade students told me that I need to forgive my brother, mistakes happen, and god does everything for a reason! These kids were so smart and wise for seven year olds. They understood perfectly what I was going through because they themselves are dealing with the same things.

CHAPTER FIVE: SAC CHAP BOOKS

INTRODUCTION

BY JIM RANDELS

Students at the Center is rooted in high school classes. Whether teaching AP English classes, writing classes, digital media production workshops, history classes, or even college courses, our staff and instructors work with students to understand their realities and to work together with their peers and allies to build the world they want. We often start the semester with questions and writings about our students' most pressing and interesting realities. These initial explorations often influence the lesson and unit planning as the course proceeds. In some cases, these student realities lead to publications. *Men We Love, Men We Hate* started that way. Students in a class at McDonogh 35 were struck by the almost absolute absence of adult males in their lives. *The Long Ride* had as one of its starting points the insistence by Douglass students that they needed an emphasis on local black history to inspire and engage them. *Who Am I?* emerged from McMain students noting that both the Vietnamese and African American students in the school had to struggle with issues of assimilation, fading family and cultural identities, and celebration of their ancestors and families.

A recurring theme in most of our classes is incarceration and its effects on students and their families. Resistance to enslavement/imprisonment is nothing new for people of African descent living in New Orleans, Louisiana, and the U.S. For any writing and education community based in public schools in these locations, contributing to and exploring this resistance should also be nothing new. Students at the Center, conceived and designed by teachers and students at McDonogh 35 High School initially in 1996, has certainly dealt with and supported this resistance in numerous books, collaborations, radio commentaries, and video productions. Our primary goal in this work has been to allow young people to voice the realities of themselves, their families, and their communities.

For this SAC publication about incarceration, *Go to Jail*, we are including the text from two chapbooks we published during the first five years of Students at the Center. *Writing, Not Drowning* (1999) collects writings from a specific project that stands in the important stream of self-reliance and self-determination that is at the heart of resistance: two young men, themselves formerly incarcerated, leading a writing workshop to give voice to other young people who are on parole. *Locked Away and Lifted Up* (2000) developed from partnerships with four key organizations in the late 1990's: Crescent City Peace Alliance, Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies, Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana, and Saving Kids Unlimited. In work with the first two, SAC published *Our Voice*, a newspaper written by teens for teens. In this newspaper we reported regularly on the efforts of JJPL and included essays and poems from *Ya Heard Me*, JJPL's collection of writings by incarcerated teens. Through Saving Kids Unlimited, SAC students and staff provided literacy instruction, writing workshops, and other mentoring for elementary and middle school students, most of whom had parents who were incarcerated.

We are excited to reproduce for a wider audience these writings by our students at the turn of the 21st Century.

The two books we reproduce here remind us that the struggle continues and that we can and should learn from our past work—not just of SAC but of maroon leaders, freedom fighters during the enslavement period, civil rights and social justice advocates—all in a long fight against unjust enslavement/incarceration.

As *Go to Jail* indicates, our country, our community, and our students continue to deal with issues of incarceration. This reality compels SAC to continue its partnerships with other groups working on these issues and to

continue teaching courses every day at our high schools to encourage young people to share their stories and analyze the society in which they live. We are excited about new educational offerings for high school students and teachers in our network through a course entitled 21st Century Slavery that will be taught by SAC staff and allies who are investigators for innocence claims and attorneys working on justice issues.

We share here these two publications from the 1990's to remind us that the struggle continues and that we can and should learn from our past work—not just of SAC, but of maroon leaders, freedom fighters during the enslavement period, civil rights and social justice advocates—all in a long fight against unjust enslavement/incarceration.

WRITING, NOT DROWNING: SAC STUDENTS CROSS THE RIVER
BY STUDENTS AT THE CENTER STUDENTS AND MEMBERS OF THE JEFFER-
SON PARISH JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM WRITING WORKSHOP

Writing, Not Drowning was originally published in 1999 by Students at the Center Press.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all teens seeking their voices. May you find the power of the pen!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was made possible through a grant from Write to Change. Thanks also to the Jefferson Parish Juvenile Justice Division, which allowed two Frederick Douglass Students at the Center (SAC) students to lead a writing workshop with teens in its program. SAC gives special thanks to Pam O'Brien, the social worker who made the workshops possible, and to the Mental Health Association of New Orleans, which invited SAC teacher Jim Randels and student Floyd Perry to speak at its annual meeting—the event that started this whole ball rolling.

The book includes writings by the key participants in the Jefferson Parish Juvenile Justice System Workshop. It also includes writings on related themes by SAC students from McDonogh 35 and Frederick Douglass who did not participate in the workshop.

INTRODUCTION: MUSIC TO MY EARS

BY PAMELA O'BRIEN, BOARD CERTIFIED SOCIAL WORKER

I awoke slowly to the sound of church bells. As I struggled up to reality through layers of dreams, I became thankfully aware that it was Saturday morning. Relieved that my dream had been just that, I went over the details of it.

I was late and hurrying to get across the river for the first meeting of the writing workshop I had made such effort to arrange. In my rush to get there on time, I did not notice that the street had been dug up and was now a ditch five feet deep. Before I could slam on the brakes, I was in the ditch. Cursing my luck, I took a deep breath and sighed with relief; I seemed to be unharmed. I would survive this, but the group would not be able to get into the building; I had the only key. I fought back feelings of guilt and frustration. I had worked too hard to make this happen, and nothing was going to prevent me from being where I most wanted to be. Suddenly I heard sirens approaching. As sounds often do in dreams, the sirens became church bells.

I opened my eyes, but quickly closed them again and gave myself a moment to listen to the sounds around me. Bubbling water from my table fountain, contented purring from my cat, and the beautiful bells of St. George's Church, proclaiming that it was 7:00. I had plenty of time to get there by 9:30.

This workshop was the result of a meeting I had attended for the Mental Health Association of New Orleans, where I met Floyd Perry and his writing teacher, Jim Randels. Jim had been voted Orleans Parish Teacher of the Year in 1998, and he subsequently wrote an article in *Gambit Weekly* about his Students at the Center Program, which he implemented at McDonogh 35 and Frederick Douglass High Schools. As a clinical social worker providing individual and family therapy for adolescents on probation, I was very impressed by what Jim had to say about education. Through work on various committees, I had developed a strong interest in the connection between education and mental health, but I had also become very aware of the gap between the two. Jim's article convinced me that I was not alone. Months later when I received the invitation to the annual meeting, announcing that Jim was the speaker, I knew it was an opportunity I could not ignore.

Jim spoke articulately about his program and about public education. His speech was accompanied by the usual sounds of people at a luncheon meeting: spoons tinkling against glass, an occasional cough, and the low murmur of voices. Then he introduced Floyd, who read an essay so eloquent in its simplicity, every other sound in the room stopped. Heads snapped to attention, and I could almost hear my own breath.

I had to wait through what seemed an eternity of speeches to talk with Floyd & Jim, but the time passed eventually, as it always does. I introduced myself to Floyd and commended him for his courage in speaking so candidly to such an audience. A few minutes later, I had the opportunity to meet and talk with Jim. I told him about my work and expressed how much I had enjoyed his article in *Gambit*. We were both in a hurry, but agreed to talk again soon. I gave him my card and left, feeling vaguely unsatisfied. On the way to my car, I saw them again, and suddenly an idea struck me. I asked Floyd if he would be interested in doing a creative writing workshop with some of my "kids." He agreed, and it became my job to attend to the details of making the workshop a reality. Luckily, Jim also agreed to give his time to the project and with a little planning and a lot of luck it is happening.

Only one of my kids showed up that first day, but another of Jim's students, Bruce Coleman, had decided to participate in the workshop. The kids talked for a while about their experiences, and out of their discussion two themes emerged: music and running away. We all agreed that everyone would write something on one or both of those topics before the next workshop.

What became clear to me while listening to those bright, creative teenagers was that I am privileged to have the opportunity to hear the voices of our future. Their thoughts, hopes and dreams are truly music to my ears.

SECTION ONE: WHY WE WRITE

WRITING AS A PATH TO EMOTIONAL HEALTH

BY FLOYD PERRY

When I think about emotional health, the word that sticks out most to me is emotion. There are good emotions—emotions that make sure you're a person who can be lived with, like happiness, excitement, consideration, and love. And also you have those emotions that people don't really like, such as rage, anger, hatred, loneliness, stress, jealousy, and, worst of all, depression. And as far as love, it's about 50/50. And though we don't like some of these emotions, we need them all not only to balance life, but also to deal with it. I mean, to me if I had to live with someone who was happy all the time, I don't think I could deal with that person. Just like if a person was mad all the time, I couldn't be around him/her all of the time.

I myself have been on both sides of emotional health several times. I've been depressed, enraged, lonely, and hurt. I've contemplated suicide, had homicidal thoughts, and almost anything else you can imagine. And the sad part about it is, I didn't have it as bad as some people. My life was my own fault, because I let myself move through these stages I named. To this day I still hold hatred in my heart, and when you've been holding it for so long, it begins to become a part of you. You don't know how to react without it. It's kind of like a man born blind. After a while, even if you can find a way to give him his sight, he's been blind for so long, that he really won't be able to function like that.

Because of the hatred that had become a part of me, I put myself through a lot. I used to be a small-time thief. I just needed a way to vent my anger and hatred. This led to depression. I remember one time, three years ago, I was at home by myself, because my mama was at work. It was late at night. So I sat down and wrote this little poem which stretched about a page and a half. (I later entitled this poem "The Reaper.") This poem was to serve as my suicide note. I went to the closet shelf in my mama's room and pulled down a silver 38 revolver. I emptied the gun of all six bullets and picked up one bullet off of the bed. I put the bullet into the barrel of the gun and spun it. While still spinning, I slammed the barrel back into the gun. I put it to my head and pulled the trigger twice. I reloaded the gun and put it back to my head.

As much as I wanted to pull the trigger, to end the misery I was feeling, and to destroy the hatred inside of me, even if it meant destroying myself, I wouldn't do it. So I put the gun back on the shelf and went back to my room. I sat at my desk and closed my eyes for about 15 minutes. While I had my eyes closed, I think I was crying, because it looked like teardrops stained my shirt and my paper. I opened my eyes and had an urge to write. I wrote for about three hours. I later called what I wrote "Memoirs of a Madman."

Dealing with these emotions is the reason I started writing. It was a way to vent my frustration, hatred, and all the rest of my feelings, as well as love. I have, to date, 20 poems, 30 raps, and I am currently working on a play called "Ghost Stories," which is mostly autobiographical. As a result, my mind is more at ease than it used to be, I'm a lot more disciplined, and, to me, my life is closer to normal than it was. And with the help of Mr. Randels, the pieces I have been writing are getting better. They are giving more detail and more background and are starting to make a little bit more sense.

WHY WRITING'S IMPORTANT

BY BRUCE "PHILOSOPHY" COLEMAN

One day I was sitting in class, and someone asked me "Why is writing important?" Writing is an expression of your emotions dealing with a lot of things. From love to pain, from hate that eats your insides, to your culture and everyday events, writing helps you understand who you are; to a certain level, you are your own philosopher when you write. That idea inspired me to have a rap poetry name called Philosophy. I have been through a lot of emotional stuff, just like Floyd whose essay and speech on emotional health started this juvenile justice system writing workshop. I thought about committing suicide like Floyd wrote in his piece, but I never put a gun to my head. We probably experience different emotions, but we had this drive to get a pen and paper and write about living a street life and trying to escape the street life.

Since I used to live a street life, I wrote about a lot of things I had built up inside me. I won first place in a contest sponsored by the Teen Expression talk show. The contest was on career choices and goal setting. I called my entry, "I Live My Life," a poem about the streets. You will see this piece in the book. I wrote this piece, because staying away from the streets is a goal for me. If I stay in the streets, I won't be able to fulfill one of my careers: entrepreneur. I start the poem off so you can see who I am and how I changed from the streets. In the poem, I say "poisonous streets are full of venom; I had to suck the poison out my life." This line means that all activities in the street will kill you, if you don't realize you're poisoning your life. I will write more poems about the streets and keep striving for my careers and goals.

Writing is an art. I can use everything that exists from music, art, hair, to anything. I always had a love for cooking food. I like to experiment with the different ingredients and spices. The way restaurants arrange food on the plates catches my eye. Swirls of thick sauces circle around flowers to make a festive meal. I use food as a way to write poetry, comparing it to the way I like a woman. For example, in my poem "My Only Serving," I wrote, "My woman is my soft-made, fresh-smelling fluffy pancake, syrups of sweetness of sister uniqueness." I also use musical instruments to express the way a woman makes me feel. For example, I would say something like, "she is my beautiful black smooth piano playing wonderful feeling in my heart." Another way I express myself with writing poetry is using hair as a way of expressing myself. For example I did a piece called "Definition Of Black People." In one part of the poem I say we're too strong, our life is a head full of hair and we're being pulled like a comb. Writing poetry has helped me use one experience or example to describe a totally different one.

Using what's around me is a good way for me to express myself. And all this writing, self-expression, and making connections among crazy things helps me connect with other people better. When I write, I learn about myself. I don't just improve my vocabulary; I also learn about what's in my mind. Like I said in the beginning you are your own philosopher. I learned about my feelings and what I'm going through by writing. When I see my writing, it makes me feel good. Writing poetry is my pleasure; it's my vibe.

Writing also makes me want to read other books and gain more knowledge. From my writing, I read other people to see where they're coming from and see how different my poetry is.

When I read, I learn writing techniques, not just new information. I learned how to write and set my poetry up on paper. When I read, I learn how other people's minds think. The more I read the more I want to write. My philosophy is "reading helps you become smarter and better able to understand what's good writing."

Writing helps me get to know and interact well with other people. When I listen to other people's poetry, I am motivated to write harder material. Plus I get to know people better by listening to the feelings they put on paper. Poems and recognition give me self-confidence to relate to people in ways besides teasing or bothering.

I get attention in positive ways. At the Jefferson Parish Juvenile Justice System workshop, everybody comes together as a group. We talk about everyday problems and write about them. That's how this book got started. A couple of us already were into writing, and the others are people who are getting the idea of what writing is all about.

My writing class at Frederick Douglass High School is a lot like the Jefferson Parish Juvenile Justice System program. Mr. Randels' writing class showed me how to make my writing skills good and better, even if you thought it was the best work you did. That's how the Jefferson Parish Juvenile Justice System program shows other people that they are capable of writing. The writing class helped me frequently with sticking to the point and not letting my work get shattered. Mr. Randels showed me how to revise my poetry. I enjoyed interacting with the students. I did a poem called "Illusion," and Mr. Randels helped me extremely. The poem was for the Teen Expression contest, and it was about teen sexuality. Mr. Randels helped me understand the time put into shaping your writing. Writing will always be my love, my first place. I will keep striving to express myself to the fullest.

SECTION TWO: IN AND OUT OF TROUBLE

PENITENTIARY ROAD

BY EDWARD KING

Before I started studying the criminal justice system, I had many different visions of prison. I didn't even know the difference between a jail and a state or federal prison. I thought they were both the same. I decided to take a class at Delgado Community College, in their Tech Prep program so that I can earn college credits while I am still in High School. I heard about a program in conjunction with Tech Prep, so I decided to check it out. I was told that we would get some work experience at one of the eight police districts while taking a criminal justice class called the "Corrections Process." Most of the people in the class were from Frederick Douglass and Kennedy High Schools. We learned many things about jails and prisons.

I never could have pictured myself going to prison to visit someone. I never would have thought that someone very close to me would end up in prison. Sure, I knew some people who were in jail, but it was mainly people I have never spent time with.

My first vision of prison came to mind when my sister's ex-boyfriend, Carl, committed murder. He said that he stabbed someone to death for threatening him. We were very close. He was like my big brother. Because he confessed, his trial went swiftly, and within three months he was on his way to the Louisiana State Penitentiary. At the time that he was arrested, I was in school, but no one at my house was aware of it. Carl used to pick me up from school just about every day. That day I was waiting for him to pick me up at 2:30, in front of the large brick church. When I finally looked at my watch, it said 3:30. I began to cry. A few minutes later, my daddy came to pick me up. I did not say anything the whole time we were in the car.

When we made it home, the first thing I did was ask my sister why she and Carl did not come pick me up. When I got to her room, she was sitting on the edge of her bed crying.

"What is wrong?" I asked her.

"Carl is in jail."

My sister and I didn't get along at times, but that was one time I really felt the pain. I went in my room and sat quietly, not speaking to anyone. I didn't want to cry at this time because I wanted to be strong. While sitting in my room, I pictured Carl sitting in a tiny room behind thick steel bars with only a bed and a toilet. I pictured him eating pieces of bread with a tiny piece of meat.

A few months later on a Tuesday, my sister asked me if I wanted to go visit him. Although I was scared, I said I would go with her because I was suspended from school for throwing rocks at another student and hitting him in the eye. I was a troubled child. I got in trouble many times. At the age of six, I stole toys out of stores without my parents knowing.

When we got to Angola, guards were patting down the people in front of us. I didn't want to be touched, but I had to if I was going to see Carl again. After being searched, we got on a dirty white school bus to get to his camp.

When I saw Carl, he still looked the same. It seemed like everything was ok, but I knew it wasn't. At first, I thought maybe he was going to come out with shackles and stripes. When he sat down at the table, I asked him how he felt about being locked up. He said, "It's nothing nice, and you wouldn't want to be in this place. Promise me that you won't end up like this."

I said “ok.” Then, I sat on the side. My sister began to talk to him. I didn’t know what they were talking about, but I saw my sister crying and I cried too.

Since that day, I haven’t had any trouble in school or with the law.

I LIVE MY LIFEZ BY PHILOSOPHY COLD MAN

I live my life; I feel all right.
I feel this striking strength to never lose.
I’m gon’ always win
As long as I awaken and accomplish my goal.
I have to be serious and expose
my goal to be
an entrepreneur with a University degree.
One day I’m gon’ make big cheese,
but I have to keep from going collapse.
I have to stay refrigerated, real cool.
I can’t get spoiled and rotten.
I’m gone stay away from
serpents and snakes.
Poisonous streets are full of venom.
I had to suck the poison out my life.
Devils and monsters were developing inside of me
when I was in the street.
When I used to smoke weed, I couldn’t succeed
Stumbling through dark nights/
Trying to make it past the evil eyes/
That laugh at me cause I’m on a down fall.
My mind is full of intelligent cells,
but I was smoking weed catching hell.
I was in a pan burning on a daily basis,
In school suspending my whole life,
expelling myself from getting farther in life.
I was walking, fire burning my whole meaning.
All I needed was a little rain to sustain from burning pain
from falling in my grave,
to help me retain my goals and careers.
The street is a wheel of fortune game.

You think you gon' make a fortune,
and then you go bankrupt.
I live my life and strive to never go back
to the streets /I escaped that/
Now I'm gon' stay focused on my goals/
To have a wife and beautiful black children
and raise them right, so their dreams and goals
can be easier than what I had.
I'm beating up the inner me,
until I realize I have to escape from the titanic streets.
You never know when you gon' sink.
The streets are Chinese checkers
Trying to king me,
a foreign slang confusing me.
From my dad to me,
Now I got to break that cycle, that repeat of a family history.
I have to secure my goals.
I always have to be buckled up.
You never know when you're gon' crash.
But at least I got away from living a book title called Street life.

BRYSON
BY ANGELLE JOHNSON

When I was going to Helen Cox High School, I was buying cigars and selling them for a dollar apiece. I collected money, but I didn't feel like spending it. So I went to Wal-Mart and stole a box of black and mild cigars, which contained about 25 of them. I stuck them in my jacket and walked out of the store, but then two women confronted me about it. So I walked to the back of the store with them. They began asking me a lot of questions. Then the policeman came, arrested me, and brought me to the police station in the Oakwood Mall.

He called my father to come get me, and my father came. He warned me that a subpoena would come in the mail. And three months later, one came. So about a week later, I went to court. The judge informed me that I was on probation, and I had to do 24 hours of community service. I chose to do it at the animal shelter.

I went to the animal shelter and had to work my fingers to the bone, such as: changing animal cages, sweeping and mopping floors, unfolding newspaper, and answering the telephone. It was hard. They found a stray miniature Doberman; he was black and short and skinny. I used to always play with him when I got a break. I asked my father if we could adopt him, and he said "No." I was sad, because he was the cutest little puppy I'd ever seen. My father came and played with him, and we agreed to name him "Bryson."

DOING TIME

BY ROMANICA GUY

To all those doing time,
I've gotta hand it to ya'll.
I must say,
I respect ya'll
Who can be away from
Your children, wife, and family
All that long time without going crazy.
Hell!
A lot of ya'll can't even go without sex
For two days when ya'll out.
And Yet
When you're locked down,
You can live without it
For 6, 8, 10 months sometimes even years.
So in that essence
I respect the way you can
Periodically change your life from
One extreme to another with ease.
I mean ya'll live in those cages or small rooms
All that long time,
When at home you stand outside all day.
Don't ever get tired
Of someone telling you when to get up,
Obviously not!

Cause once you're out, you go right back in.
At least most of you do.
And yes,
I respect ya'll
Cause that's not something
I can see myself doing.
Ya'll brag about who ya'll beat up,
Who ya'll pimped,
And then
How long ya'll spent in solitary

Or How many times ya'll were beaten.
To me it makes no sense.
Ya'll could be out here enjoying life,
Celebrating it,
Going to parties.
Not like the ones ya'll have,
But parties with boys and girls,
Parties where you can do whatever you want,
Come when you want,
Leave when you want.
Ya'll can hang with your friends
All night if you want.
Or, you can kick it by
One of your girlfriends.
But instead you choose to be behind bars
With nothing to do but take orders and
Dream about what you could be doing.

But, if that's where ya'll want to be
I Respect Ya'll!
Only, just don't look for me.

SECTION THREE: TEASING AND BEING TEASED

OVERCOMING TEASING

BY ANGELLE JOHNSON

One lovely Tuesday morning, I was walking through the gym at John Ehret High School during 3rd period. The lights were dim, the paint was chipping off the wall, and there were no bleachers. It's so raggedy, everybody always wants to go outside and play.

I was walking outside with my friend, Raquel, when I walked past a boy named, Lil Daddy. He yelled, "Angelle is fat."

I separated from my friends, but they had heard Lil Daddy's big announcement. I felt very sad. I held it inside, but when I got alone, I burst out crying.

I could have told Lil Daddy how skinny he is or how short he is or how ugly he is or how immature he is. But I didn't want to stoop down to his level.

So after the day was over, I caught the school bus to the Circle K. Then I walked down Manhattan to the red brick building that looks like a police station in the projects. About once a week I go there for a writing class led by two students from Frederick Douglass High School. I told their teacher, Mr. Randels, about how Lil Daddy teased me. Bruce, a funny, slender guy who's braided not dreaded, told me, "Girl, you not fat. You fine as hell and you look like Halle Berry."

Floyd, the other Douglass student who raps like Nas and is always chewing on straws, told me I was beautiful and not to worry about what other people say. He said people just tease and hate what they can't comprehend.

My story about Lil Daddy even inspired Bruce to write a story about teasing, and it made me smile. So that day I was feeling depressed, but Floyd and Bruce brought me up and were making me have higher self-esteem.

WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES

BY ADRIANE FRAZIER

The explosion of bombs and incessant gunfire pierced the air on April 20 at Columbine High School. The people of Littleton, Colorado were shocked that such a horrendous crime took place in their friendly, small town. The suspects, who are said to have been on a suicide mission, were members of what was known at Columbine as the Trenchcoat Mafia. The members were recognized at Columbine as academics and computer nerds. They were also into the "gothic" lifestyle. They wore black trench coats and dark sunglasses.

As I watched the news and listened to all the interviews, something struck me as very strange. No one knew who these kids were. Of all the students who were interviewed at Columbine, none of them could give the identity of any of the members of the Trenchcoat Mafia. These kids were outcasts, shunned by their peers and forced to form an intimate clique, a clique that killed fifteen people and injured over fifty. What drove these teenagers to seek bloodshed? Was it the constant bombardment of insults by their classmates? Was it lack of popularity? Or was it the neglect of their parents and teachers?

All of these things may have played a part. But I believe the fact that they were not accepted by peers played the largest part. These kids had everything. They had a stable family and money, but they lacked happiness.

High school is stressful, and it feels as if you are on a constant quest to find your niche. What if you're not an athlete or a cheerleader or even president of the student body? Where and how do you fit in? People who don't conform to what society expects of them are ridiculed. It goes back to kindergarten. If all of the other kids had red shoelaces and yours were yellow, you were teased by a bunch of toddlers. But as you get older, people get meaner and the ridicule becomes more destructive.

Parents have the responsibility of instilling confidence and high self-esteem into their children. They also have the task of teaching them that violence is not the answer. Violence is a learned behavior. It is not a trait you are born with, although some scientists like to argue that it is inherited. So the ultimate question is why were my fellow teenagers so angry? Why did they feel that death was their only out? A senior at Columbine described how he saw his friend get his face blown off. I wonder about the long-term effects that this will have on his life. Will he duck when a balloon pops? Will he have gruesome flashbacks when the fireworks go off on the Fourth of July? We witness acts of violence every day, and we see it on television. But never do we actually think about this harsh reality until it hits close to home.

The key to preventing a tragedy like Columbine from happening close to home is to look closely at our "homes." For me this means that I need to reflect carefully on my interaction with others at school. In my English II class, for example, we get into debates. My teacher splits us up into groups depending on if we agree or disagree with a particular topic. I remember one time we were debating the topic of "Is it ever okay to kill someone?" Only one person said that it was never justified. The other twelve people in the class, including me, opposed her. She sat there almost afraid to say anything. But when asked to argue her side of the issue, she spoke her opinion. Some of my classmates were infuriated by some of the things that she said. They were ready to jump across the desk and strangle her. But despite the fact that I strongly disagreed with her, I was not ready to crucify her. I respected her opinion and avoided an unnecessary altercation. More students need to look at how they can express their feelings without using violence. Those of us who are in the class can exemplify this behavior by doing more listening than arguing.

I am not exactly sure how things are run at Columbine High School. But at my school I know that violent situations are uncommon because our teachers and peers genuinely care about us. We accept the differences and faults of others. I'm not sure what was going on in Dylan Kliebold and Eric Harris' minds. I don't think I'll ever know. But I do know that I do not want a tragedy like this one to invade my home.

GIVE IT TO THE PERSON YOU ARE TEASING

BY BRUCE COLEMAN

Teasing goes on every day. At school, students make fun of classmates who wear bargain shoes. Some black students tease about each other's hair being nappy. On the bus, people tease about overweight people who take up more than one seat. Even at the mall, instead of minding their business shopping, teens are busy downing someone else's appearance.

When people are teasing each other, it only causes problems, such as fights or bursts of emotion. When I was attending Bradley Elementary School, everywhere I looked there was always somebody getting in fights over teasing. The main times this happened were during lunch and after school. When the bell rang to end the school day, instead of going home, children would crowd around the back fence and down the street just waiting for something to happen. You could see the lust for stupidity in their eyes. The crowd was girls and boys with loud laughter ready for the action of a fight.

Fights happen because children laugh and embarrass other children and make them feel out of place. People will react when pushed too far. People need to be aware of other people's feelings. People who are doing the teasing probably don't want anybody teasing them.

Another thing that causes problems in the field of teasing is material things. One person might feel like he or she is better than the next person, because he or she can get what he wants, especially when another person does not have it like that. To me there's a miscommunication. People need to understand what another person is going through. They shouldn't tease other people because they don't have name-brand shoes or name-brand clothes or anything. I think if people can't thank God for what they have, they shouldn't have what they got. Give it to a person you are teasing.

People need to put themselves in the person's shoes they are teasing. Nobody is perfect. What boggles me is people who are born with natural disorders—for example like teeth being crooked or overweight or mental problems—and still are being teased about it. People tend to talk about physical things, things that happen naturally, and tease people about these things. That really has an effect on them mentally. People already know their problems; teasing just makes it worse. Even though people should be strong and ignore teasing, it surely can get hard sometimes when it's a constant thing.

On a personal tip, when I was a young child in elementary, I didn't get haircuts. I used to always have a bush. In those days, you got teased for that, 'cause people didn't know about bushes. That's one good example. You shouldn't tease someone, especially if you don't know what it's about. Teasing probably would have made someone else think there's a certain way you are supposed to be. That person probably would have cut his hair off. Just like in any situation if the person being teased is weak, it may make him do anything, like commit suicide. I even got teased about my shoes, because I wore Payless shoes like Pro Wings—not because my parents were poor, but because of the simple fact my parents didn't know about all that name-brand stuff. In their mind, and even in my mind, I saw clothes as clothes and shoes as shoes. My hair was my hair. No matter who you are, you shouldn't be ashamed of yourself.

SECTION FOUR: ADDITIONAL WRITINGS

WHY DO MOST STUDENTS CUT CLASS?

BY DAVID HARRISON

Is it because they don't want to learn?

Or is it because of the fire that burns?

Maybe it's because of the girls on the hall?

Or maybe because the fellas are playing ball?

Is it because you're hustling for greed?

Or is it because you're in the back smoking weed?

Every day of the week you came to school late.

But you'd rather go by your girl and copulate.

Here is mom. "Wake up, get your books, go to school."

You aunt hearing that—you with your boys breaking the rules.

Is it because you feel all ashamed?

Or do you put on a front so you won't look lame?

While you're in class, do you keep your mouth shut

And after go to lunch and back that thing up?

Now it's '99 your last chance to shine, and you can't wait.

But you aunt gon' graduate.

Did you think about that when you were walking the halls

Or on the court playing ball?

Hustling for greed, smoking that weed, cutting class

to let your hormones pass.

You don't want to look lame

like your boy on the corner whose shoes are always the same.

Now you feel shame because they're rooting his name.

He's walking across the stage with a fresh fade.

And you're looking at me, cause you don't have 23*.

**23 refers to the number of course credits needed to graduate from high school.*

RINGS OF FURY

BY CABRIOLE BROOKS

I got it done over nine months ago. I believe the exact date was August 24, 1998. I had no idea that one day could change my life so profoundly, let alone the way society would forever view me.

My mother and I were cruising around in a sky blue Mitsubishi Mirage. The card that I was holding in my left hand said something about a music store on Rampart St. located in the French Quarters. My mother knew that area pretty well, so I told her to step on the gas. My appointment was for 11:30, but my watch said it was ten minutes past twelve. It took us at least twenty minutes to find the place, but finally we made it to a dusty brick building that looked smaller than an outhouse.

Although frightened by the appearance, I rushed inside with my mother tagging behind. Inside was no more appealing than outside, but to my relief the music clerk behind the counter told me that the place I was looking for was up the stairs. Lo and behold, the shop upstairs was extremely different from the chipping walls below.

The first thing that caught my eye was the gigantic spider that hung from the ceiling. Although it appalled my mother, I found the enormous insect amusing. A lady spotted me gazing idly at the colorful arrangement and asked if I needed some assistance. I went over to the glass counter and told her I wanted to purchase a nose ring.

Then came the questions. Are you eighteen? Is your mother present? Are you allergic to any medications? Have you eaten in the last eight hours? After answering the barrage of questions, my heart started thumping really fast. The reality of what I was about to let happen finally hit me tenfold.

All of a sudden my mother said, “Cabriole are you sure you want to do this to your body?”

I thought to myself and wondered if this was just another one of my teenage phases that came about every month or two. Would I still appreciate having a hole in my nose years from now? Or would I come to regret the decision I would make that day? After a quick look in a nearby mirror, I decided that I was more than sure that I was doing a good thing—something that would in no way affect me negatively. And so my mother signed release papers, while I waited in an all-white room for a licensed piercer to walk in and assist me.

The first few days were the hardest. Whether at work or walking in my neighborhood, there was always some bewildered kid or co-worker who would walk up to me and ask “Why did you get a nose ring?” It made me very self-conscious, and for a short period of time I started to wonder if I had made a big mistake. I started telling myself day after day that I was an individual and that some of the brightest, most revolutionary people had been shunned because of their appearances and beliefs throughout their lifetime. But I had to admit to myself that I was a little uneasy with my new appearance and its effect on the people around me.

School was starting, so I let my mind slip into senior mode. I stopped caring about the nasty “you look like a hoodlum” comments my eighty-one year old aunt taunted me with day after day. For over seven months, life went smoothly. My co-workers started to conform to a positive view of my nose ring. Students and teachers at school began stopping me in the hallway to tell me how cute my facial jewelry looked and also to inquire about the location of the piercing shop. I was always happy to share my experience with anyone who asked. I wanted people to know that not everyone who had a nose ring was a gutter punk or some insecure person searching for attention. I mean, I was an honor roll student involved in numerous projects to help the community and school, so I felt it necessary that people realize how unfair it is to judge others by their outward appearance.

Unfortunately, all good things come to an end. The bell was ringing for first lunch as I walked into my counselor's office. As always there was a small crowd of students waiting to speak to her. I pushed through the gathering and opened my counselor's door. She was sitting in her chair, and I could see she was pretty busy, so I waited patiently for her to finish talking to a student who had already been sitting down. Finally, when their conversation was over, I moved in to ask her a question about my financial aid packet. After numerous interruptions, my question was answered wearily.

On my way out the door something I will never forget happened. My counselor for four years told me to never re-enter her office again. Of course I had to ask why, mainly because I was unaware of anything I may have done wrong. In response to my question, my educational advisor, whom I had respected as an elder for four years, told me indignantly that it was because of my nose ring. I was told to never enter the office again unless there was some type of emergency. Obviously I didn't know how badly my appearance offended and disrupted the school's administrative policies.

I have to admit, I was hurt and upset. Before I had gotten the nose ring my counselor had treated me quite fondly and had even remarked time after time that I was a nice kid to have around. But suddenly all those compliments about my character had been contradicted by the ring in my nose. I wanted to cry out in disgust, but instead I told myself that I had to fight back. I couldn't let this discrimination take place in my own school, the place where among all else I should have the right to feel accepted and treated fairly. So I went around to other students at school who had pierce rings and asked if they had been discriminated against at school by teachers or administrative staff. To my dismay, the majority overwhelmingly said yes. One student admitted to me that she had been told that she could not enter the office even when she just wanted to get an ACT packet to help her prepare for testing. Other students told me of times when the principal and vice-principal would pull them aside in the hallway and chastise them and even sometimes demand that they remove their piercings.

The horror stories went on and on until finally I didn't want to hear any more. Adults were openly badgering kids because of their appearance, mainly piercings, while class clowns, truants, and students with several school violations were roaming freely. What was so wrong with us? We were kids who had good grades, respected authority, and even better wanted to further our education in college. But we were still being denied the right to get educational advice from our counselors. I had to keep asking myself why my classmates and I were being picked on.

I have less than two weeks left until I graduate from high school. Ironically I didn't realize how judgmental people can be until now. I'm only seventeen years old, but I know from now on that no matter how nice I am or how neatly I keep myself, there will always be someone who will be offended by my decision to wear a nose ring. I find that very sad, but I am able to accept the fact that everyone is not as open-minded as me. My favorite teacher in middle school told me long ago, "If you can respect and love yourself, then don't get mad when others can't do the same, because in the end it's only what you think that really matters."

So time is going by, and the hurt I acquired after being discriminated against by my counselor is slowly diminishing. In college I plan to major in English and psychology. I'm hoping that maybe one day in the future through writing and logical thinking I can persuade others to judge people not on their appearance, social status or other superficial factors, but instead on the contents of their heart and actions.

SHE WALKS (LOVE IS...3)

BY FLOYD PERRY

She walks with the grace of her ancestors/The bloodline of queens runs thru her veins/Whispering and appealing to the senses/Finding it impossible to stay low key/though you sometimes try/But the radiance you give off is unmistakable/When you pass it's just something about you that turns heads/Whether it's the admiration of strangers/Or the hating in your own family/Amongst your sisters/you know them/Jealousy & Envy/

The ageless wisdom reflects from your deep, dark chocolate brown eyes/

And yet and still/most are too involved with your younger sisters/Infatuation and Lust/to realize your true beauty/You are hardly ever kind to those who wish to seek out your secret/So cold/I guess it's because you have been thoroughly abused by so many that it makes it hard for you to trust anyone/That is what causes you to hurt the people closest to you/people who wish not to hurt you but only to nurture you /

just to understand /And I feel when people understand you/They will no longer abuse or mistreat you /They will see you in all your divinity/ And all we wish to do is understand/So maybe one day we can truly know what Love is

A TIME I RAN AWAY

BY BRUCE "PHILOSOPHY" COLEMAN

As a child I ran away several times, at least that's what I thought it was. You know when your parents are always arguing at you. You feel like you are never appreciated for anything you do. You get more attention for the bad grades instead of the good grades. You get a sense of not having any attention at home; you try to find it at school or any way you can. Then for being a little kid, you get whipped a lot. You feel like there is so much pressure slamming against you. You're ready to explode; you're ready to run out the house and don't come back, even though you don't know where you're going.

Through a lot of different things, young children have their thoughts of running away. They probably are thinking on emotion, not even realizing where they are going to go. They don't have no money, no job, nothing that their parents have already. So they go and try their hardest to make it in a cold, scary, dark night. They become frightened and start getting scared. That's when that child's emotions start to kick in. He goes home. Some parents are happy to see their child, because he was gone so long, and they knew the child ran away. Or some parents won't even realize that the child ran away.

In my childhood years there were times I ran away. For instance, one time I ran away during the nighttime. I was walking down the dark street, scared and spooked out. I went and sat in a K & B store and read magazines and comic books all night, until the security guard came and said "go home."

When I got home, my parents just said, "Where were you?"

I told them I was in the store reading the books.

But I kept stealing as time passed by. The more I stole the more I loved it. I was so caught up in stealing; I grew up doing it. During that time there were more consequences. I realize I had to stop stealing and get a job. My parents made me realize you can't have what you want when you want it. You can't just run away or take any other easy road out of something.

RETURN
BY VEATRICE PAYTON

Back-bending believers in the true faith of together we stand,
Divided we fall back/
Wards, defending their habitat with gutter gats
And soldier rag hats, disguising their cowardly essence, and
We'll meet later peacefully at the BBQ.

Odd thoughts of that nigger pullin' that trigger, if he figures he can't have
His cock hit tonight.

Lined up beside alley way side walls, across from the red light district
With our back against the ground—
No pleasure, just gratuity.

We sit on our stoops and holla' at the ladies' short, hemmed, flashy skirts,
Baring legs of mint-colored skin and beige-colored halter tops
With slip knots on their backs.
We sit under bullet-filled, piercing skies sippin' on red kool-aid and gnawing
On stereotypical bite-sized chicken, with a side order of sweet watermelon,
Sweet potato, soul food.
Drenched with henn' and gin.
No Astie Spumante today ladies, no falling on our backs.
It's time to go back . . . black.

We went back to our cornfield days and discovered that we've all been wrong,
Disrespecting our brothers and our brothers disrespecting our sisters'
Wide hips and open thighs.
We forgot what we did back when, you know,
Way back when we was back-bending believers in the true faith.

Back when we kissed the six-day perspiration on the faces of our
Broomstick hoppers who swept the sunlight away with daily plows and
"How's we ever gonna be free?"
But when the next day appears,
Master plunges into our sisters' wide hips and
Pried open thighs that
Lie limp after the evening pillage.

And yet we return with our strength,
That strength that made us march to Montgomery and
Seek refuge under the Second Amendment.
We had the right to protect we. We had the strength to teach we—
For our new generations, for the strength we endured.
So when will you return? We're waiting, to teach you with our back-
Bending believers in the solidified truth, in a faith based on brotherhood.
When you going back?

LOCKED AWAY AND LIFTED UP: PRISON, PUNISHMENT, AND LIBERATION

Chapbook originally published by Students at the Centre in 2000.

Writings by students from Students at the Center (SAC) classes and young people in the Saving Kids Unlimited program, whom SAC students worked with as writing mentors. The book includes additional submissions from incarcerated or formerly incarcerated young people with whom the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana is working.

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Special thanks to Harry Haynes of Saving Kids Unlimited. Three years ago, Harry began partnering with SAC by bringing young boys he works with at least once a week to Frederick Douglass and McDonogh 35 High Schools for writing conferences and mentoring sessions with high school students. Here we realized that nearly 100% of the boys with whom Saving Kids works have fathers who are incarcerated. Some of these boys' writings appear in this book. Their spirit shines through it as high school students began exploring in their own ways, inspired by the Saving Kids crew, the issues of prison and punishment.

The Open Society Institute provided primary funding for this project.

HOW OLD WERE YOU WHEN HE LEFT?

KATIE HUNTER, MCDONOGH 35 SAC TEACHER

After being tricked not only into saying the words but also spelling them out, I decided to make Hollywood complete the poem since he wanted to see it published in a High School Chap Book. “How old were you when he left?” I asked, expecting an immediate response. Instead I got a long pause and squint from Hollywood. He isn’t called Hollywood because of his aspirations to be a super star (though he does want to play professional football) or even because he is the class clown. Hollywood inherited his name from a man serving life in the Angola State Penitentiary.

“Come on! I know it is hard. Just close your eyes and remember. I remember the day my father left like it was yesterday; I was four. My sister was in my mother’s arms, and I was crying because I couldn’t stay up, then he walked out of the door.”

“I was little,” he said with his eyes still shut. His face assumed a specific pensive look I’ve learned to recognize. It is as though he wants to burst into tears or laughter though that has never happened.

“How old? Four or five?”

“Oh, it was before I was even one.” I saw his brother, Hollas, cut an involuntary scared stare over his left shoulder. Then he quickly forced interest in a piece he was creating.

“Well, what happened?” I glanced at my watch, noticing I had been at school for eleven hours.

“He came in, and the police were knocking at the door as soon as he walked in—as soon as he walked in,” he said shaking his head and showing more emotion than he had before. He really trusted me. How selfish had I been? He was beginning to open up, and I was thinking of my dogs. My distraction, though, was a blessing in disguise; he may have had an easier time with me being strong, attentive, and not bawling like a baby. I continued the conversation.

“Before he could do what; what did he love to do?” The numbness inhabiting his being melted, and his innocence prevailed (as it always does).

“Before he could sit down and watch TV,” Hollywood said with a smile, which made his eyes shut and would have made me cry if I weren’t so fatigued. By partially separating myself from my emotions, I allowed him to finish his poem solo, while I went to assist his twin brother, Hollas; then when I went to talk with Jonas, I accidentally neglected Isaiah.

At ten o’clock at night I finally sit, and my brain begins to buzz. The four young men I spent the afternoon with participate in a program called “Saving Kids” that focuses on at risk children and is partnering with Students at the Center on a writing and mentoring project. These four young black men are in a situation that is not unique. Six out of the six I have met do not use the word “dad” around their houses, and four of the six have fathers in jail. I know that many children of all races and genders grow up without the presence of their birth father.

It isn’t the chemistry in that room that leads me to be unsettled; it is because I encounter every day young black males who have experienced five or six more years without fathers. It is the thought of their future, our future, that scares me. I can see Hollywood, who has such respectful language, cursing in front of women without a passing thought. I find it easy to imagine their ears are deaf to the advice of women because they aren’t likely to have anyone feed them positive images of women. The music will tell women to “shake it like a dog,” and

women are referred to as “bitches.” I fear I will see these young men are imprisoned within what they think they know.

I teach kids with no desire to show their intelligence, to gain knowledge of something that lies outside of their realm. They have no one like them to teach and guide them. Human beings, I think, identify with that which is most dear; I learned from my mother to be a strong woman and respect myself because she was so similar to me, and she did not give up.

In Hollywood’s poem, he is lost in a desert, without water, without people to play with.

It breaks my heart that a prison has already been constructed for a soul as innocent as Hollywood’s. As a 23-year-old white woman, I hope to make him realize he possesses the key to freedom. Can he learn from someone who reflects an image so different from his? I’m comforted by the presence and work of McDonogh 35 students from my SAC classes. They provide role models and instructors much more similar to the “Saving Kids” group we work with than I am. They can help him move “out of the desert” where he says he is in his poem. Minds and souls need not be locked in a prison created by their fathers. Young men like Hollywood, Hollas, Isaiah, Jonas, Robert, and Raynaud already realize something it took their fathers much longer to learn.

JUVENILE JUSTICE

BY ERICA DECUIR

You would think you were at a barbecue. Juvenile Court of downtown New Orleans seems more like a gathering of old friends, an after-school junction on Canal Street at worst, a noisy detention hall at best. Youths of all ages and sizes come dressed in tee-shirts sporting the newest member of the Cash Money clique, oversized Fubu or Nautica jeans, and handkerchiefs of various colors tied fashionably around their heads. Pagers ring endlessly in the packed court waiting room, and loud conversations of old acquaintances punctuate the continuous roll call of waiting defendants.

Throughout the boisterous crowd of youth—overwhelmingly black and male—you will find the mothers, grandmothers, aunts, girlfriends, and sisters of the waiting defendants. These relatives seem to be the only ones who understand the seriousness of the situation. They carry fussy babies on their sides and bundles of miscellaneous papers under their arms, shaking their heads at the innocence and rebellion of the troubled youth. To a young intern like myself, this courtroom seems like a mock scene out of a bad Wayans movie.

I sit nervously and curiously in my two-piece blue suit, alongside one of the attorneys whom I shadow as part of my internship. For the past two months I have been interning with the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana, a new agency that does direct and indirect representation of juveniles and safeguards their rights within the system. While the lawyers are debating defense strategies, I sit in awe of the apparent ease of the defendants and then saddened by the implications of it. I seem to be the only person deconstructing the relationship between psychological warfare and the juvenile justice system. I seem to be the only one praying over the futures of all these young black men. I was so deep in thought that I missed the roll call of our client’s name.

He was a big boy for his age, 5’10” and 170 pounds and recently released from juvenile prison at the age of 17. He was up for review, to see if he was progressing while he was out of jail and to determine if further “rehabilitation” in a corrections facility was needed. He was definitely one of the few who understands the seriousness of the situation; he had been to hell and back. He walked hand-in-hand with his mother and wore dress pants and a nice shirt. He smiled to the clerks and lawyers and nodded to the judge. Fortunately, the judge asked

only a few questions about his employment, GED, and relationship with his family, and then granted supervised probation. The boy beamed the brightest smile I have ever seen on a black man's face.

I spoke to him briefly afterwards. (He was in a hurry to leave juvenile court.) I commended him on his appearance and his sincerity about avoiding recidivism. I compared him to the others in the waiting room, and he waved his hand as if to dismiss my comment. He leisurely stated, "they haven't been hit yet. Right now, nothing matters. They don't know what it's like until they have been there, and then their whole world is rocked. Suddenly everything matters, ya dig?" And then it fell into place. I was sitting in the waiting room deadlocked over an issue that he summed up in two seconds.

Many of the defendants in the court waiting room were there on simple charges, some repeat offenders, others caught up in a random police sweep. For most, the process seemed easy: meet with your public defender minutes before the case is heard, plead guilty, and either pay a fine or receive probation. What you don't realize is that the process gets more stringent every time your name is called, and every time you are before the judge more criminal offenses are added to your record. All of a sudden you are 16 years old and standing before a judge who declares you to be custody of the Louisiana juvenile corrections until your 21st birthday.

Bam. Suddenly, everything matters. Suddenly your mother and sister are crying and your little nephew can't look you in the eye. Suddenly you are handcuffed and your public defender is picking up her files. Suddenly you remember hearing that Louisiana has the harshest juvenile prisons and has been cited for a host of human rights abuses to juveniles while in custody. Suddenly, everything matters, but a little too late. Don't wait until they have taken your life to live it.

SENTENCED TO DEATH: INSPIRED BY MUMIA ABU-JAMAL BY TOWANA PIERRE

I stand in a gloom-shrouded
room, waiting to hear my fate.
Hopelessness seeps into every
pore of my body as I look
into your aging face, each
wrinkle marking another
life you've destroyed.
Your eyes are filled with
hate.
Whether it's for my locked
hair or my brown skin,
I don't know,
but your hatred dooms
me as surely as your words.
Sentenced to death.
Sentenced to years in a
lonely cell praying for

absolution.
Sentenced to living
within a system that
hounds me.
Sentenced to watching
others carry out my
fate and knowing that
my time is coming.
With a bang of the
gavel, I'm led away
amidst the cries of
my family and friends.
I pass my supporters
with their arms
upraised and their
fists clenched in solidarity.
Away from the
mahogany furniture
stained with my
blood and the blood
of my ancestors.
Away from any
Belief I'd ever had
in justice.

PRISONS AND SCHOOLS BY JOSEPH HICKS III

In my seventh period class, we talked about how children went off the edge and shot classmates. As a result these children end up in jail. I felt sorry for them and told myself I couldn't handle the jail experience. Jail meant being trapped in a large building with very few windows, almost never getting a glimpse of natural light. Then there would be some siren or horn to tell you where to go or where you should not be. That instant I knew jail wouldn't be an environment I could live in. I couldn't bear having to wear the same thing every day, the exact same thing everyone else had on. And wearing an identification number all day just wouldn't be comfortable.

That moment the bell rang and derailed my train of thought. I left my dimly lit classroom to see my assistant principal in the hallway. Then I and everyone around me checked to see if our khaki shirt was tucked neatly into our khaki pants. I was tucked in but was still stopped, because I didn't have on my ID. He said he would let me go, and I went on to my locker.

Thoughts of jail still ran through my mind. I thought of how I said I couldn't live in an existence I was forced to endure every day. I thought of how my school is a little bit like that forced jail existence. The only difference is between 3:15 p.m. and 8:20 a. m. I am let out on parole.

This dark epiphany was followed by a feeling of fear and uncertainty. Fear for what this system had created and uncertainty about the future. The most disturbing aspect was that the society treated its children the same way it treats its criminals.

This similar environment may have produced a similar result. Are we turning our children into the violent creatures we see on the news? Has our need for control forced our children to the edge? Have we crowded so many young people into one building—to save money?—that we cannot treat them like humans? What other building has three bathrooms for over 800 females? When did we give up on the judgment of our children? At what time did we turn our backs? Or maybe no one is listening. Maybe they think they know what's best for me. They think they know what I need. They command me to do what they think I need. I tell them what I need with my mouth. Then I come the next day and tell them with a gun. Who's right? Who's wrong? Nobody knows, because if they did, then we wouldn't have this problem.

MY LITTLE COUSIN

BY WAYNE MITCHELL, JOHN MCDONOGH SR. HIGH

His father keeps going to jail and he has no father figure in his life. I know it's hard because I never had a father figure in my life. The only reason why I'm living is because I have a strong mother. His mother is not that strong. It will be hard for him to make it. Who will show him how to be a man? He has no male figure in his life. His father should have shown him. You know what's sad? There are so many kids going through this. Who will break the cycle?

YOU CAN'T JUDGE ME

BY GLORIA WILLIAMS, JOHN MCDONOGH SR. HIGH

So, I did something wrong,
But that don't mean I'm gon' sit here and sing a sad song.
I am gon' to do the time for the crime,
But when I'm free,
Don't mock me in the streets.
I can't change what I did,
But my heart is pure.
You say I am bad news,
Are you sure?
You can't judge me,
And don't believe what you see,
These chains won't hold me,
Your hate won't kill me.
Why? Because in my heart
I only know.

UNTITLED
BY KEVONTAE JACKSON, JOHN McDONOGH SR. HIGH

It's been three years since
I've been off the streets
And it's got me thinking
I know I shouldn't have been there
And took that man's life
Sometimes I wonder how
Did they get my fingerprints off the knife?
I know it's got my wife thinking what I've done.
She's probably angry because she used to be number one.
Now I feel heartache and pain.
Do I lose or do I gain,
RESPECT that is?
I wonder about my kids
How will they react knowing their daddy's a killer?
Was he the one that pulled that trigger?
How did it happen?
What made me do it?
I don't know.
I guess it's too late.
Damn I got to go time is up and lights are out.

UNTITLED
BY BRITTANY LASHLEY

Standing on the corner
Got put in jail
Had to stay there cause mama can't make bail.

A PRISON DREAM
BY JOHN LACARBIERE III

Man, I was amazed when I first walked in this place.
It was strange all those looks people had on their face,
And just think of the people there for a murder case.
One day in the cell was livin' in hell.
How did I ever evolve in jail?
Fights until someone is dead,
Mattresses with no springs on the bed
And no privacy at all just for one phone call.
Man I'm glad this is just a dream,
Because I cannot fall.

UNTITLED
BY TREVIS DERUISE

Prison ain't no place to play a game.
If you're there, you'll probably go insane.
I know for a fact that it ain't no place to be,
Havin' shackles from your head to your feet.
When you're in prison, people take your manhood,
And sometimes you don't know if your family is alive and well or dead.
In prison people try to make you their b**** left and right, and
If you say no, you will have to kill or fight.
You have someone to tell you what to do and where to run,
And even when to eat, sleep, or use the restroom.
You see the same things every day and all day
And begin to see men in a completely different way.
If you're happy with your life, don't ever go to jail,
Because you will not find it fun.
It's pure hell.

PRISON
BY RAPHAEL JONES

No control
In the hole
Death
Life
Sharp ass knife
Got stabbed in the back
Getting beaten till you're black and blue
Hold my pocket
Shine my shoes
Scared of bedtime.

PRISON
BY ANDRELE

I rest in this cage to which you have
demolished the key. There is no freedom
because you say freedom is a privilege.
Yet you tell me to do as I please, and
beware of the consequences you'll send to
me. Do you actually believe that denying
what's rightfully mine will make me realize
the flaws of the world? Only time will
tell when I'll know that this steel door
will become an illusion. When it does, the
chains of these widespread wings will expand
like the sun expanding its light at
6:40 a.m. Don't expect me to show excitement
to you when these metal bars are opened,
but expect to feel a great sense of agony
and hurt. How could you? How could you take
away something my elders fought for? Now,
I fell as if I'm the last person in line,
and I must catch up with the rest of the
group before time runs out. I hate that
feeling, but you started it. So what do
you do now?

HOW DO I FEEL IF MY DAD IS IN JAIL

BY JONAS THEOPHILE

Well, I don't feel right without a father because me and my father would be at the park or the lake spending time with each other right now. My father and I would be playing football, basketball, baseball or something. We would just do something to stay out of trouble. It is easier to stay out of trouble with a father around. I can tell you the boys my father was hanging with are either selling drugs, dead, or in jail.

I will never say never, but I'm not going to run my life into the ground by selling drugs or anything. God did not put me on this earth for nothing. He put me on this earth for a reason because he wanted me to live until my life's end.

He died on the cross for our sins. If it weren't for God, we would not be on this earth. He did not put me on this earth to sell drugs, try to kill anybody. He wanted me to go to school and finish elementary, junior high, senior high, and college. He wanted me to get a high school diploma, and he wanted me to be somebody. I already know I'm somebody because the Lord Jesus made me somebody.

People are lawyers, doctors, firemen, and policemen. People can work at Burger King or McDonald's, but don't think that you can't pass to college because the Lord put you on this earth, so you can get somewhere in the future. It is hard without my father, but I know he would want me to be somebody.

PRISON AND PUNISHMENT

BY ANGEL FASCIO

Hey, how's it been?

Lord, only knows when—it has been some time since we have seen each other or even spoken. I am doing fine, and you have been coping. You know, every time you said you loved me, it filled me with pain. I knew you were only making a false claim. I know that I'm not important enough to put effort in your life—to pick up a phone, pass by, or even write.

I don't mean to put you on the spot. I'm sorry if asking for a loving father-child relationship is too much. I want to believe the things you say. Today, however, is not the day. I stopped believing a long time ago. The things you used to say, you didn't bother to show. Do you know how much it hurts when you get dressed up and no one cares to call or let alone show up? It has taken a while, but some way I've learned how. I know the sadness you put me through I don't deserve. I understand that it's not my loss, but yours. I'm sorry if I took too much of your time. I just thought you should know what was on my mind.

Love,

Your Child,

Angel Fascio

BROKEN PROMISES
BY KIRSHELLE WILLIAMS

You promised me forever.
Now forever's gone.
I sit here wondering
If I'll always be alone.
Time after time you swore
You'd never break my heart.
I had neither fears nor worries.
I felt it was true from the start
Now my life's meaning and joy? –vanished.
I have to learn to do without you.
How can I go forward?
When my whole world—it's suddenly blue.
Tears keep me company through the nights.
My heart embraced by loneliness: it seems
Now I only feel true comfort
When I get to hold you in my dreams.

What do you do to stop hurting,
When the single reason you cry
Is caused by the only one
Who can make you not cry?
It's the little,
Crazy things about you I miss:
Falling asleep in your arms,
Waking up in heavenly bliss,
All those beautiful nights
Of us making passionate love.
And I thanked God every day
For dropping an angel from above.
Losing you to me means
That I've lost everything.
Living this life without you
Is worth nothing.

I know I shouldn't dwell on what we had
Or hold on tight to the pain,
But the day you left my life
I knew I'd never be the same.
But you promised me forever.
Yet forever is gone.
Now I realize without you
I can never move on.

PRISON AND PUNISHMENT: SCHOOL PLEDGE BY ZAHN PATIN

As a student of the New Orleans Public Schools, I understand that wearing my ID is the key to my success. I understand that being individually unique is unacceptable and does not help to solve problems. I understand that wearing regular loafers and black socks is unnecessary and harmful to my learning. I therefore pledge to sacrifice what makes me, me, play by your rules, give up on what I believe in, and get over it in order to make my superintendent and school administration proud of me.

LETTER TO MY FATHER BY ISIAH THEOPHILE, III

Dear Isiah Theophile,

This is Isiah Theophile III. I am now 11 years old. My birthday recently passed. I really didn't do much, but I did get eighty dollars and a pair of new shoes to wear on my feet. I know if you were here, we would have done more together.

I go to Albert Wicker Elementary School. I am in the fifth grade. My teacher's name is Ms. Smith. I like her, but not all the time. I don't like her when she punishes me for things I didn't do. My best friend's name is Russell Burnard. He goes to school with me. We play every day when we have P.E.

I love to play football, basketball, and go to karate. I am a first-degree blue belt. My karate teacher's name is Marshall White. I've been going there for three years. I have a lot of fun when we go on field trips.

My mother went and brought a stereo. It's big and black. Mom still loves you, and so do I. I really miss you. I really want you to come home. When you come home, we will spend more time together. We will go shopping and go fun places around the world, like a son and his dad should do.

Well, until my pen touches my paper again, I'll talk to you later. Bye.

Love,

Isiah Theophile III

I WANT MY FATHER TO COME HOME

BY HOLLAS BURTON

I really want my father to come home, but he has to stay in jail for what he did. If he came home, we could go to the park and have fun like other children. Other children go places with their fathers and have fun.

I don't know what he did; I never asked my mommy before. I don't know why. I don't really want to know. If he did something horrible, I don't know how I would feel. I would probably feel angry that he did something he should not have done; I feel I am better off not knowing, so I am not disappointed in my daddy.

I was a little baby when he went. But I may have seen him when I was little; I just don't remember. The first time I went to see him in jail when my aunt took me, it was in 1999; we had a lot of fun. He worked in the kitchen, and my first cousin was with us. He told me he loved me so much and he wished he could come home to see all of his children.

POEM

BY HOLLYWOOD BURTON

Dad, without you I am in the desert.

Without you there is no breeze.

Without you there is no rain or storm.

Without you there is no food or meat.

I can't take a walk in the park where there are trees and plenty of breeze.

Dad, without you I am in the desert.

Without you there is no rain or storm.

Without you there is no food, no meat.

IMPRISONED

BY ASHLEY FORNERETTE

Deep, way down in there. Fighting off the darkness, digging deep down into secret places of my soul, hiding, staying in the nut cracks of my mind where shady dealings have been told. My soul beaten down by the lack of faith, it just lives off what I cannot see. I know where the skeleton in the cupboard hides. The key to every door, I know where it is. The hush-hush, undisclosed knowledge of self should not be untold. Holding up the promise, I know that you can. It's getting harder to be someone. Think you've sold your soul if you don't believe in heaven, hell, you have heard it all before. I'm running in so many ways, it's tearing at my insides. I wish to be untied: I've found my hidden secrets. Where can I run to? How can I escape? Know what is right is wrong, know what is wrong is right. Will I make it, or am I alone? Will anybody help me, or must I struggle on my own, through the darkness? Some stars have shone, but dim enough to fade, but bright enough to glow.

Tell me why these silent tears are so. What is the source of my pain? Trapped between two worlds. Ideas and thoughts, totally go against everything I know to be true. So what the heck? I am so confused. The flesh has *desires*, usually of carnal influence, but, the spirit has *needs*. So scared of something so real, but not seen. Not certain what it is that I want from this life. I want to go back, back to when I first met You, everything was utter

bliss. The stronger the faith, the more complicated the struggles, and the harder it is to say “No,” the harder it is to do what is right.

I wanted to just let it all out, but when, where? Speaking into the void of my room, it seems so senseless now. This feeling I wish to destroy, just as it rendered me from an enjoyable life. Words: I have run out of them, but my thoughts continue... randomly contradicting the previous ones. What have I done? How do I stop it? I cannot live like this, having guilt, *knowing* what you do is wrong, but persistence from nefarious influences. What is the point of it all? Certainly one possessing such a mind as my very own would be able to break through, but I cannot. My pulse seems so vibrant, as hard as it gets, my body moves with its every beat. It causes my writing to be disturbed as it also pounds vigorously at my fingertips. Loss. People know nothing.

A YOUNG BROTHER WHOSE SOLAR ENERGY IS RISING STRONG

BY BRUCE “PHILOSOPHY” COLEMAN

People are born into a world of unexpected possibilities. Young innocent babies are like small miniature suns that want to become novae one day.

Little children go through elementary with all these possibilities to become a track star, a business owner, or a novelist. Some people let their solar energy grow and create their life like a solar system when they are young. But others have to go through life with problems.

It is amazing how at one time most people were young curious kids who always had questions—willing to learn. Later some of those same people just collapse like four-legged tables that only have two legs.

One person who experienced a collapse but now is rising again is Andrew Hebert, an 18-year-old who spent three years in the juvenile jail. While in jail, one way he found his solar energy again was by writing poetry.

Before I met Andrew, I had already experienced working with young people caught up in the juvenile justice system. I myself had even been in jail five times before—though each time was only briefly. Through this background and my participation in Students at the Center, I had the opportunity to lead a writing workshop with teens on parole. This form of helping someone else motivated me to continue doing well.

I encourage people looking to help youth to find ways to help incarcerated teenagers. In these jails you will find good minds, like Andrew Hebert, who want to explore their talents and their world. Most young people in jail are not all bad. They may have just done a couple of stupid things or had poor judgment. That does not mean we should just lock them away and never think about them or communicate with them.

In fact, often the youth that seem like role models are not doing as much as the ones who are in trouble of some kind. For example, I was at the Xavier Journalism workshop with 17 high school journalists this spring. I asked all 17 to submit articles to *Our Voice*, even articles that they had already written for their school newspaper. I never received the articles, but two of my fellow workshop members did come to one meeting.

Where is their solar energy? They must be keeping it for themselves. Are these district school students? The ones we always hear about as being poorly educated and unmotivated? No, I was the district school student—the only one there. The workshop members from magnet and private schools would not contribute. They are the “motivated” magnet school students.

Andrew Hebert spent the last three years in a place that is nothing like a magnet school. The closest thing to magnet he experienced was probably all the metal detectors. Yet he has shown a great motivation to write and

to share his writings and his story with other people. In the future, when I start new organizations or am looking for help, I'm going to jail instead of a magnet school.

Hebert went through three years of prison. They didn't. There's a lot of inequality still in our society. Some young people from certain neighborhoods or families smoke drugs in the privacy of their "ok" lives, while others have to turn their head and deal with security checking them when they go to school.

I always thought that magnet school was this great place where a lot of motivated people go. Come to find out they can be just as lazy as those same kids who cannot get a high score on the test. I learned that from the Xavier Journalism workshops.

Picture if those same students, who obviously have it easier than the average black kid in New Orleans, would put their all into community action. Imagine the impact on the community. They could be helping people like Andrew Hebert.

That's when I knew I had to go find people I can connect with, people like Andrew. I am now moving to connect with people who are out there drinking and smoking weed every day of their life— just like I was. I need to connect with people who lived on the streets like I did, who stole cars and are running from police and watching their backs every day.

Every last one of these youth hanging on the streets is not looking for a change. But these youth who look like trouble now might make a difference one day—just like I'm doing. Shouldn't we keep hope in them?

See people can have great amounts of solar energy (talents and gifts), but that does not mean it's rising strong. Thank god for brothers like Andrew Hebert. Keep shining brother, and help other people shine too.

It's important to see the mind of a young man who's been in prison for three years and to see the rebirth of who he always was. Andrew shows that any brother who is poor, struggling on the street, or in a school whose test scores are low can be just as great as any person who did not experience these things. These things may even make him stronger than you.

THE DETERMINATION OF A YOUNG MAN BY ANDREW HEBERT

While away, locked up, trying to make a change within myself,
because I can't hold the truth away from myself,
because my shadow speaks
with auspicious signs that are favorable.

Looking back on my childhood
as an infant to a toddler
and when things just got wild for me,
I can't blame anyone for my own stupidity.

But this is the determination of a young man,
to change for the better,
because I'm not happy with this life I live.

I have to stay strong,
because the weak can never advance,
while holding on to faith,
because it's a will that will never fail.
And I can always rely on it and
courage to stand up for what I feel is right within my heart.
But I have to keep things real with my heavenly father,
because he's my creator
and the overseer of my life.

TOO MUCH DRAMA BY ANDREW HEBERT

I sit here trying to compromise with myself, searching far away to overcome this side of me that I'm not happy with. But the trip part about it is nobody knows it but me.
It's hard to open up,
to let feelings out.
I'm scared that it might seem strange—by me being me people will think I'm trippin'
so I hold my peace. But I realized that if I don't speak my mind,
I will never be heard.
My mood began to change at random.
I try to maintain, but I can't control it.
It's like I'm not even there.
I sleep to fight it off but yet, it still overrides my thoughts to defeat it.
A person can hold so much, but then it comes out hard, fatal, and brutal and everything just goes wrong.
I look over people that care.
Not wanting to feel their pain.

THE CONCRETE GRAVE BY GEORGE JOHNSON

Locked in a cage far away,
Where trees endlessly go,
Barren fields of hopeless dreams,
Rap sheets are all to show
Coming of age in an area
Where stone is the main barrier,
Concrete friends are created to pass the time,
And barbed wire surrounds my spirit.

Every day life is consumed in a 23 and 1,
Is that one all there is to look forward to?
And if you don't take time to better yourself,
The beast will consume your mind and leave you rolling on the floor.

Unknown to many, but notorious to a few.
Danger lurks in the dark empty spaces and the overcrowded locale,
Brutal attacks and beatings with bats,
Remorse is on the mind of those regretting.

All time is lost through the years.
Many will pass through the walls,
In through a bus, but out in a casket,
This graveyard fortress will forever stand tall.

AVOID THE BARRED PATH BY GEORGE JOHNSON

People of color, prison,
Poverty, escapeless
Leave the hood, become a sellout
Refuse to better themselves

Dropouts, lead to prison
Doors close, limited
Education, key element
Opening of opportunities

Goalless, left with prison
Rejecting change, excitement of "the hood"
Success, know what you want
Reach the goal

Drugs, get your fix in prison
Addiction finds stealing, robbing, and killing
Make more options
Where is our help in the "hood?"

WHAT DOES YOUR LIFE MEAN TO YOU?

BY JOHN

(Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana submission.)

What does life mean to you? How much is the word life? In society we have two meanings of life:

The first meaning of life is living, breathing, your heart beating.

The other meaning of life that we live is life in prison: Do you call that living? Yea, sure you breathe and your heart is still beating, but are you really living?

In my eyes you are not. Having somebody wake you every morning, somebody always over your shoulder breathing down your neck telling you what to do, that's not living. Being able to live is being able to make your own decisions and choices. Everybody makes mistakes, so why ain't everybody in prison? We all have our own prison inside of us, but being locked up behind bars is what I'm talking about.

How would you like your kid, your own flesh and blood, locked up like this? Well, I've been there. I spent three years of my life just like this. Who's to judge me? The person people call "your honor," who is he to say "Guilty," lock him up? People who have never heard these words can't really relate, but you have to know where I'm coming from.

Then the other thing that's messed up is when a kid is given to the state, they start talking about all the good programs and stuff that they have to rehabilitate the kid. Well, my friend, I'm sorry to tell you but that's bullshit. They tell society all this just so you don't feel sorry for your kid. They try to make you think that this is the best thing for him.

It's all about money. That's all they're after here in Louisiana. I spent about the last two years for my time at a facility called the "Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth." It was labeled the worst facility in the state. Not only was it the worst, it was the most unorganized. To me I'd say it was "hell on earth." It was so dysfunctional. They would always be bringing people in that they thought would make a change for the place, and every time someone new came in they would always seem to come up with all these different ways to discipline us, but the problem was not us.

Yes, we acted up and did foolish things, but when foolish people tell you foolish things you act foolish. What I mean is the staff. They had so many under-qualified staff working there to tell us and teach us better ways. But if you have someone always cursing you and trying to abuse you physically, you're going to rebel. I don't care who you are.

Take for instance myself. I got locked up for ungovernable. (Not obeying my parents.) When I went in, I was just a kid with an anger problem and I was a little rambunctious. I liked to have fun, but when I came out I was the same but with a broader look at the different kinds of crime that I could commit. So when I got out I started doing the things that I learned while being in this same facility that the state assured my parents would help me. Yea, it helped me all right. It helped me get in the situation that I'm in now. What I'm trying to ask is: Is a kid's life worth all this? Locking them up, do you really think that they will solve his problems? I sure hope you don't, cause it doesn't do anything but start new ones. Ask yourself this question: Do I want to help my kid or hurt him? You say you want to help him? So why do you send him to this "hell on earth?" You're probably asking yourself, "How could I stop that judge from sending him there?"

Well, I know some crimes are more serious than others and you have no choice, but a so-called crime didn't call for all that I went through. There are alternatives besides locking him up.

Another way you can stop this is by standing up and letting people know what's going on. When a kid tells you of some kind of abuse that he or she went through, listen. Don't put it off as "you're learning your lesson." Tell society. Let the people know what your kid is going through. Let people know what the state is doing, let them know where their dollars are going and what they are funding. Let them know what the state told you and how they lied.

Again, I ask you, "Is your kid's life worth all of this? What does your life mean to you?"

BRAINWASHED

BY ROBERT

(Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana submission)

No expression on my face, my body seems dead
But a silent scream echoes through my head.

I'm living in a world of someone else's make believe
When reality calls back I don't want to leave

I think if I ignore them my problems will fade
When I look at the stars they've all gone away

Inside I scream for help but there's nobody to hear
I'm here on my own my world so false and cold

Beneath the silent presence I'm ready to explode
I break down inside still I don't cry

As I stare away blankly inside I start to die
Agonizing screams of torture are recorded in my head
Surviving day by day, some say I'm insane
My thoughts and beliefs they are lost and can't be found

Still living by a copy of my disillusioned mind
I know some day things will change
I can't be incarcerated forever

Love will still be hate
Truth will always be lies
I'm tired of making excuses and alibis

As I write this another soul will surely die

What I really want is someone who can kiss away the suffering
Show me how to love
I'm tired of a street mentality
And living like a thug.

SOCIAL INJUSTICE

BY NEIKA NICHOLSON

Early Monday morning April 2, 2001, my sister kept pacing around the floor in the kitchen, holding the phone tightly in her hand. She then started crying. I then asked “What’s the matter?”

“Eric is dead.” My face then dropped out of shock. I couldn’t believe that he was dead.

Montrell, Eric’s cousin, told her that Eric had been killed by the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD), walking home from work Saturday night.

The next morning it hit me really hard when I started getting ready for school. I was putting on my socks when I just started crying, I couldn’t stop it. I didn’t realize it until then that I was really going to miss him.

Eric was a good child. He never did anyone anything. He was always willing to help someone in need. Eric was only seventeen years old when he was killed. He was so full of life and potential. Everyone said he would be the next Frank Davis. Everyone knew he could whip up a dish in five minutes or less. I remember one time he made fried catfish, and everyone said it was so good. It was finger licking good.

I’m really going to miss him, because he was a very understanding person who only wanted to help people out with their problems. One time I remember him helping me with the problem I was having with my boyfriend. I remember he told me to stick it out and things will get better. I took his advice, and now my boyfriend and I are together and stronger than ever.

We never will know what Eric could have been because his life was taken at the young age of seventeen, when most people are just discovering who they are and what they want to be. Eric will never be all that he could have been. Eric will never go to college, get married and have kids. When will it stop? When will police officers stop killing innocent people, just because they think they fit the description of someone who is wanted by the law, or just because they are out late at night? When will it stop?

LOVE TO/FROM ASSATA OLUGBALA

BY CAMERIAN WILLIAMS AND KASSEY GEATHERS

Incarcerate: 1 to imprison; jail 2 to shut up; confine

Incarceration has affected a number of people in many different ways. Most people have had a loved one (or possibly that of someone they know) who has been institutionalized for some reason or another. If victims were involved, their family can usually be seen on the evening news shedding tears, talking about the effect such a tragedy has had on their lives, and suggesting possible punishments for the accused offender. Rarely does the news show how the families of the accused are affected by their loved one’s mistakes, or the false accusations made by the “law.” Mother Assata Olugbala, whose husband has been detained in Angola State Prison since 1978 for allegedly planning a robbery in which a white man was killed, gave a glimpse of what the system has done to her family.

“The incarceration of my husband has resulted in the total collapse of his family and ours. All of his children are currently involved in issues of either health or drugs. His younger son, who is 40 years old as of two months ago, is in Dixon Correctional Center in Louisiana. He will be coming out sometime in 2003. His older son... we don’t know where he is. He took a trip from New York to St. Louis, and we haven’t heard from him

since. That was about 10 years ago. His only daughter is HIV positive as result of a life of drugs. His mother died about 5 years ago. His stepfather died this year. He has one sister who is currently very ill; she is in need of a liver transplant. He realizes that if he had been present, everyone's lives would be different. And I think that the main reason that their lives are gone is because of his incarceration."

A main point that Mother Assata seems to make is that incarceration does not make a man any less of a man.

"Every person has a gift, and to be deemed an 'inmate' or 'prisoner' does not take that gift away from that person. My husband was incarcerated when I met him, but all the gifts he had were still there. That was why I married him. His integrity, his steadfastness, his intelligence, his love for his people, his awareness of principled behavior, and living by that under the circumstances which he lives makes him a mirror image of what I have always strived to be. Where he is is not important. What he represents, who he is, and what he is still trying to do made me want to become his partner. I am still trying to be a better person, and he is an EXCELLENT teacher."

Mother Assata wants everyone to know that a loved one in prison is nothing to be ashamed of.

"Most people prefer not to share or let it be known that they have a loved one or friend that is incarcerated. I speak openly and freely about the incarceration of both my husband and his son. People who are incarcerated are in great need, and what they need is love and commitment. Their families are usually the only ones who come out and visit them. There really is nothing to be ashamed of. These people are in the process of paying their debt to society. They are making their amends. They have a lot of pain and loneliness. So to go and visit and spend some quality time—I want to encourage people to really do that. Stay connected because they really are in a situation where they are not getting...they are being dehumanized in many situations. They have very little that they can count on and depend on. Though the shame is in them being there because those places are not where people should be. Many of us need to spend some time just getting familiar with how our penal system works and get involved in the reform that needs to be in place. Go visit your friends; go visit your loved ones; go visit your children. Support them, and be there for them. It will come back to the community if you do it right, and give them that love."

Prison is mainly a spirit-breaking institution that tries to corrode the minds and hearts of anyone who comes in contact with it. Its inhabitants get mentally lost in its dark corridors of sadness and locked behind bars of despair. But the silver lining is that there is always something people on the outside can do to make the experience a bit less hellish. All it takes is a little care and love to keep flowers flourishing in spite of darkness.

**Source material for this brief oral history of Assata Olugbala came from an interview done by Newbians, a media production team sponsored by Students at the Center and directed by Kalamu ya Salaam. The Newbians are Adriane Frazier, Ashley Jones, and Towana Pierre. Ashley Jones did the camera work and conducted the interviews.*

INCARCERATION BY DAYOKA EDMUNDS

I can remember one time I saw my father in the jail cell. My memory is as good as it was when I was 8 years old. I can look back in my mind and see a strange building that had no name. Sharp wires that could destroy someone surrounded the fence of the building. I was sitting in the car waiting for my mother to tell me to get out of the car. When she finally told me to get out, we walked to the gate and there were security guards that surrounded the gates. They checked our pockets and let my mother and me enter the building. Big iron bars, orange pants and shirt, incarcerated is what my father was. He had to eat food that he had never seen before,

make collect phone calls to his loved ones, and write letters to his past residence. Incarcerated is what those things remind me of. I never knew why, how, where and when he had got incarcerated. But seeing him in that predicament made me feel like I wasn't wanted.

At times, I felt like my father was the one who cared the most, who gave me what I wanted when I wanted it. He used to tell me all the time: "I'm going to give you the world, Dayoka." Deep down in my heart, I believed that my father would give me the world. When I was about 7 years old, he took me to the zoo. I can remember all the animals, the elephants, the lions, the tigers, and bears, *OH MY*. He took me to a gift shop located in the zoo area. I walked in the gift shop thinking I was going to come out with the world, everything in the store. I searched the gift shop looking for something very interesting. I found these earrings that were the shape of the world. I knew right then and there that I had the whole world. My father kindly paid for the earrings and put them in my ear. For about one year, the world was mine before I lost the earrings.

As a young girl, I would see my father all the time before he went to the big house. After a while, Baton Rouge was the residence of my life. I used to get phone calls from my aunt and uncle all the time telling me that my father was incarcerated and that he told them to tell me that he loves me. There in Baton Rouge is where I found out that my dear father had died in prison. My uncle made a phone call from New Orleans, and it was one of the most shocking calls I had ever had.

I was 11 years old, chilling in my room watching *Pocahontas*. The phone rang, and my mother answered it. She was so mad and sad at the same time. She told me to sit down. As she held the phone to her ear, she said, "Baby, Your daddy died." I was thinking of all those good times we had together. My mother told me all those things that he had died from, and they were unbelievable. I guess I had to deal with it. Deal with it in sorrow, hurt, and grieving forever.

I have tried to discover why most people get incarcerated. Why do they get a long time in the pen? What can we do to help these people stay out of that place? Today, the prison is where most people stay for life. It is their home, their lonely life.

I have a friend who is incarcerated at this time. He writes me letters all the time, but I just don't take time out to write back. He wrote to me saying, "I am incarcerated for jacking someone." *Jacking* means stealing. "I am so sorry to have led you to believe that I am such a bad person." He was so nice and sweet before he went, but the reason for him being in jail just shocked me. His time in there is so short. He only has nine months left. It hurts me so much to hear about young people incarcerated. My friend is only 19 years of age. Smart, educated and not thinking at times is what he is.

I don't know what it is like to live in jail, but it shouldn't be a good place is what I understand.

My boyfriend, Diamond "*Dino*" Brown, and his best friend, Randy "*Kaos*" Pollard, were incarcerated for a day and a half. Their reason for this incarceration was not their fault. I was a one true witness to the whole story. Diamond & Randy had an argument with a 13-year-old boy. At first, they all were just playing. But the 13-year-old boy took the problem seriously and wanted to fight. His uncle came outside and started a physical fight with Diamond, and his friend Randy jumped in. By Diamond being 19 years old and Randy being 16, the police were called by the 13-year-old's mother. They went to jail and got out late the next night. Randy was a minor and got out a couple hours earlier than Diamond. Late that night Diamond was released from jail. He called me on the phone, and I was so surprised that I could hear his voice. We laughed and joked for a while, and I asked him, "Was it fun being incarcerated?" He gave me a mean thundering voice of terror and said, "Do people have ice in hell?" So I guess that meant no of course. People in hell don't have ice, and I guess it was like hell being incarcerated, and he needed some cold spring water to cool him down.

Dealing with the death of my father, I have always wished that no one had to suffer like my father did. I hope they don't have to go through the things he had to.

In my heart I do believe that my father was incarcerated at a young age just like my friends, Diamond, and Randy.

MY UNCLE MICHAEL BY TIA' SEIYON L. DALTON

On a cool night one spring, my family was all sitting around in the living room, reminiscing about the "good ol days." There was a knock on the door. I answered, and it was a police officer asking for my uncle, Michael Smith. I walked him into the room where everyone was. When the police officer asked for my uncle again, my grandmother asked, "For what reason?" She rocked in her rocking chair playing in the dog's hair.

Officer Jones said, "I'm sorry, but you, Michael, are under arrest for auto theft, robbery, and murder."

The officer told Michael that he was looking at 20 years to life. Uncle Michael was devastated. He had just gotten married, and he and his wife were expecting a baby very soon. I then asked the officer, "When did this happen?"

He informed me that it happened on the 16th of September. I explained to him that that was impossible for my uncle to have committed any crimes on that day, because that was my birthday and he was with me. Everyone looked sad and was hurt because someone in our family was going to jail for something he didn't do.

Uncle Michael was first taken to the jail at Tulane and Broad, then to the Angola prison for men. Every day that went by, the family fought for his freedom, because we knew he was not the one who had done all those crimes. Every day I cried because my uncle and I were so close. I knew he hadn't done all those things. The day after he went to jail, his wife gave birth to a little girl, who was named Mikael Smith. It really hurt me to my heart to know that he was suffering for crimes that he didn't do.

My grandparents talked to the family lawyer. The lawyer said if he did the crimes or not, he was looking at 20 years to life in prison, which meant that he would not be able to be with his little girl or his family. We went to court for months and months at a time and didn't get anywhere. Before we knew it, his little girl was one year old. We threw her a summer party, because it was hot and boring for us to stand in one place. I, myself went to see my uncle, because I missed him so much and whether or not if he did or didn't do the crime, I would still love him. When I saw him, he and I both cried. It was funny because I had never seen my uncle cry until that day.

After two years had passed, he was still in jail. Day by day, month by month, we informed him about his little girl. Another two years went by and before we knew it, Mikael was 5 years old, and we had been fighting for my uncle's freedom the same amount of time. We went to jail. We went to court. Finally, the judge told us that the man who had done all of the crimes that my uncle had been accused of had turned himself in. On March 30, 2001, my Uncle, Michael Smith was set free. The judge said he would get the headlines right as soon as he could. We all got home, and we had a big ol' party for his freedom.

SUDDENLY
BY CHRISTINE BROWN

Suddenly my auntie married a convict.
I just couldn't understand it.
What could he do with no freedom?
No long walks in the park or a night out on the town.
No picnics and parties and coming home to your husband's smile or frown.
He couldn't help her financially.
She already had a single-parent family.
An imprisoned husband would decrease even more of their money.
Bad enough they couldn't afford to pay for his cigarettes.

Suddenly my auntie married a convict.
And I thought it was crazy as...
I thought it was crazy.
She's a nice-looking lady.
She couldn't be desperate.
If that were my mother, I'd have a fit.
He couldn't take her to any fancy restaurants or on special vacations
Because he was on a 25-years-to-life vacation.
But they both had faith in parole.

Suddenly my auntie married a convict.
And Asha Bandele did the same...
She did the same thing.
But it was a love story.
A good, bad, happy, sad, smile, frown, up, and down love story.
And I loved that story
That Asha Bandele wrote,
That Asha Bandele lived.
I love that story,

And suddenly I understand that
The Prisoner's Wife wasn't just about being married to a prison man.
It's about being that strong black woman
And standing by your man.
It's about faith.
It's about friendship.

It's about love
And strength.

And when my auntie suddenly married that convict, I didn't understand it.

But now I understand that it's about taking a stand on the side of that strong black man who needs support from that strong black woman.

Suddenly I understand my auntie and Asha are as strong as they get, and suddenly I accept that I have a convict as an uncle.

WE ARE WITHOUT BY KASSEY GEATHERS

We are without fathers or elders
to guide our crossing into sound manhood.
We are without mothers and women
to guide us into elegant womanhood.
We are without pride and dignity
for our own bodies and how they are portrayed.
We are without respect between a man and a woman:
Look at the way they treat each other.

We are not unified.
United we would stand, but we are divided
and we fall.
Divided by a seed planted years ago,
haunted by the germination of years of oppression
long ended but still there,
giving off the scent of broken homes and broken promises.

Our oppression planted the seed,
making us feel the need to care only for one's self,
hell on one's people.

Our oppressor has a loose grip on power.
We must take ours back
or we will be without:
without money, without jobs,
without resources, without homes,
without family,
without our culture.

We are without.
You are without.
And because my people are without,
I am without.

IMPRISONMENT OF THE MIND BY JAMES WINFIELD

When you think of “mind-forged manacles,” what comes up? Being trapped in the intellectual world. One can think of several things when hearing that phrase. I am thinking of people telling their young ones that a certain race is bad: they are the devil. If you’ve ever noticed, young children play with each other no matter what color. Why can’t teens and adults get along with people regardless of race or religion?

Parents brainwash their children and put bars on young minds: they can’t talk to this person; they can’t do this; they can’t do that. Let the child make his or her own decisions, and let that child decide whether or not that person is good or bad. When parents tell children whom they should like and dislike, they limit their character.

PRISON BY LLOYD DAVIS

Today, a black man’s “destination” in this country is to either be dead or in jail by 18. We aren’t even predicted to succeed to the 12th grade or pass high school. Most of us aren’t even on a third grade reading level.

I, Lloyd Davis, a McDonogh 35 junior, am trying to succeed. I came from the Calliope Housing Project like many black males in our city. Though I maintain a “thuggish” mentality, I still proceed to be on the right track. I know a lot of jailbirds and people who were incarcerated. Institutionalized is how they always found themselves. I have a cousin...my cousin loves to steal.

James, also known as Tony, is a 15-year-old male, tall and slender figured. As a child, he and I encountered some conflict against one another. He was obsessed with stealing from a young age. By the time he reached ten years old, he had acquired candy, clothes, and money through theft. Then he was into grand theft auto. While in jail, the usual stuff happened and turned his life around.

He, a shadow of my dark side, instilled a force in me when he stated, “I wish I had your life.” From that moment on, I knew no matter how it seemed, he looked up to me. So he, in an indirect way, is my motivation for the right track. I guess someone has to break the black man’s destination course.

ANGOLA 3 RESPONSE BY HASINA B. ASHE

Justice for all isn’t always just. I’m confused; my mind is vague, and so are the restrictions of this country’s laws. How is it that the first Afro-American spotted is the correct suspect regardless of looks? I’d hate to think that the incarceration of Robert “King” Wilkerson was not only the fault of an unbalanced justice system but also a melanin or color-based ignorance called racism.

Tell me how can one man kill over 180 living, breathing beings and get the much-anticipated attention and publicity he wants, along with being placed in the same places as bank robbers, thieves, or minors? Is this just? The whole scenario makes me full of disgust and animosity. Once R. K. Wilkerson was placed in an inhumane box for more than two decades, with an hour or day or less of freedom. And for what? He was falsely mistaken on numerous occasions, and his justified anger resulted in prison revolt. I don't blame him.

For years the system ignored him and his appeals. Yet the same system publicly complains about overcrowded prisons. The justice system is making itself look like a total hypocrite—and it has lost my RESPECT!

FATHER BY LATASHA BARNES

Trapped in a dark, cold cell for life
Because he chose to stab a young
Black man with a knife.
My father will never again be able
To see the breaking of day
Or watch his young kids grow up
To be successful some day.
All because of one irresponsible,
Stupid mistake
That caused his children to live out their
Their lives without a male influence,
Which makes their hearts ache.
He knows he can't take back that
Dreadful mistake that altered his
Future,
But he knows he can encourage
Them to get an education and try
Their best to succeed in everything
They do regularly.

FATHER, WHY ME? BY LATASHA BARNES

My heart has been snatched from
Me. I can't breathe. Now my
Body goes limp.
This is what happened when I came
Of age and learned the horrid secret

That had been kept from me for
So long.
My father is in jail.
I feel like yelling, "Why me, Lord?
Why me?"
Why do I have to have a father
Who was selfish enough to
Commit a crime so brutal
He will never see me grow up,
Graduate, and become a doctor,
Lawyer, or police officer.
My father sits in his jail
Cell day in and day out and
Writes letters to me, telling me
How I should act and what
I should do.
But regardless of how angry
I am at the moment, I
Will go back to loving him in the
End.

GUILTY

BY JESSIFFI FRANCOIS

Sentence: Life in maximum security penitentiary
Prison Assignment: Cell block # 3, solitary confinement
Prison #: 4375324 JDPP
Clothes: None
Privileges: Eating daily and bathing once a week

No mingling or association with the general population of prisoners

No sunshine
No recreation
Nothing

And absolutely no chance of parole

USI: UNITED STATES OF IMPRISONMENT

BY HASINA ASHE

Prisons today are overwhelmingly increasing. In size and number, prisoners of every possible descent are crowding jail cells across America. These alarming increases raise many questions for me. The first is why aren't justice system workers complaining? In particular, what about public defenders? Some cases are handed to them along with a zillion others that deserve careful investigation. All cases do not receive the attention they require, resulting in wrongful sentencing.

I don't know about you, but I see a pattern. Many important people complain about the amount of government dollars a year it takes to feed a prisoner. Yet those same people continuously add to the problem they are complaining about. Inexperienced lawyers serving as public defenders are over-stressed, underpaid, and rarely even know more than their client's last name. Big Shots are getting out of a situation the amount of thought and consideration they put into it.

As long as prison populations increase, prison conditions will worsen. The government says it is already spending way too much money on each individual prisoner. A *Newsweek* poll in 1997 showed that an increasing number of innocent people were being convicted. In 1997, the speculated percent of innocent prisoners was 12% and has probably grown drastically since then.

Incarceration has become a way of living for many people who have chosen the wrong path. The word itself sounds cold and mean, but to some it is a place of love and shelter. Benny White III, a 33-year-old African American male, has led a life of crime since the age of 18. Throughout his criminal career, his unwanted slip-ups soon became habitual, making the jailhouse his playground. Jails have often been described as the "Best Grab Criminal Scam."

"Why?" you ask. Because what better way to get over or back at the system (for whatever reason), than to live rent free, not to mention no bills. Free cable and meals at an average annual price of \$26,000 a prisoner.

Compared to life on the outside, the average prisoner is living the ideal life—no job, no responsibilities. My prison—today's world—seems a lot worse. Sadly, I feel as though anyone in or below the working class, especially minorities, are bound in a box with far too many restrictions. And to top it off, many live in poverty-stricken neighborhoods where rent, food, taxes, and interest rates exceed average. This is my prison!

Unbalanced? I think so. Our government has some major reconstruction to do. What is the U.S. government doing besides trying to make its top one percent richer? What is the U.S. government doing about overcrowded cellblocks besides assisting them in becoming more crowded? Why do the convicted live a life 10 times less stressful than a free person of color? Is everybody blind? Does no one see the prison that has been set up for us? "The land of the free and the home of the brave" is what they say, but what I see is a land of corruption and evilness and a home that rightfully belonged to other people. Have our history books taught us one big lie or did somewhere between the thought of being free and forgetting about enslavement help us to become prisoners of this unjust society? I do not know the answers to all the questions I have—and I may never, but I do know there is more than one type of prison in this country, and immediate change is needed.

CONTEMPORARY STUDENT WRITINGS (2005–2015)

FLIP THE SCRIPT

BY KALAMU YA SALAAM

It never fails. “By a show of hands, how many of us have family members or friends who now or in the past have been incarcerated?” At least one quarter of the hands in the room are elevated, usually it’s closer to a third of the class. The most disconcerting fact is not how many hands are up but rather although many of us share similar conditions, most of us never realized that incarceration was a widespread social reality. We just never knew that Tareian’s father was in prison or that Briana’s mother was incarcerated. We knew that Philip had been arrested before and that Wesley had been stopped and frisked as a suspect, but it didn’t occur to us that this was something more than prejudiced police at work.

We know we are suffering but we don’t know the very real causes, and worse because we don’t understand why we suffer, too often we think it’s because something is wrong with us or it’s because of bad luck. We don’t know that the problems we face are more than personal, that we are not alone in dealing with these issues, that incarceration is a serious and widespread social concern.

One of the goals of our classroom work is literally to flip the script. By writing our realities we erase our individual ignorance. When viewed collectively, individual shame and sorrow is replaced with personal and social resolve to make ourselves and our world better and more beautiful. As we learn specifics about who we are and how we came to be who we became, we enable ourselves to envision a different world, a different us. And it feels good to improve ourselves. Changing our world for the better is exhilarating. Socially relevant education is both exciting and uplifting rather than drudgery and downpressing.

Transformation is necessary and sometimes painful, but it’s the pain of therapy, the pain of practice and training, the physical and psychic pain of letting go of old habits and letting go of comforts that debilitate and entrap rather than strengthen and free us. In the early stages the work of transformation often causes severe discomfort as we wrench ourselves away from old routines, as we develop new routines. Indeed, initially we will fail more often than we succeed. We will be disappointed more often than pleased with our first drafts.

The first step in dealing with trauma is cleaning the wound—and that can be, and usually is, painful. But except in rare cases, we must remove the bullets, wash away the dirt, purge the poisons if we want to heal. Writing our realities and sharing with a community of those who care about us is an unequalled healing force, especially for those of us bound by poverty and miseducation.

Breaking out of social prisons of poverty and miseducation is necessary, but getting free and living free is never easy. To be free means not just taking personal responsibility for behavior but also shouldering social responsibility for our education and development. We must be our own liberators and we must learn how to fight back against oppression and simultaneously learn how to do the hard work of social self-reliance. The first step is to recognize and analyze our personal and social realities.

Harriet Tubman had it one hundred percent correct—she could have freed more people if she could have convinced them that they were slaves. The goal of our education ought to be to illuminate our ignorance. Before we can learn what we don’t know we need to know that we don’t know. We need to understand who we actually are in order to envision who we want to become.

Read what SAC students have to say about who they are and how they have been affected by their social circumstances. Incarceration is a major issue—if you don’t now, you best find out because prison ain’t no joke.

Incarceration is real and carries heavy penalties that last far beyond time behind bars. We will never be truly free while so many of us, far too many of us, are incarcerated and stigmatized by a criminal justice system that profits off our misery.

We write our stories not to invoke pity or even sympathy. We write to break free. Our writing is a major part of our resistance and a critical part of our development. Join us in the struggle to become better human beings. Join us in creating a better and more beautiful world. We write to make life better.

INCARCERATION BY JHANIE DAVIS

In life people make mistakes and have to deal with the consequences, especially African American young males. My brother has been in jail since October of 2013. Yet, the prosecutors are still working on his case. However, while he's in prison my mom and grandfather are providing him with the things he needs. With that being said, as you can see, it's like our family is in jail with my brother.

My brother is 27 years old, has two children, graduated from high school, and was in college. He wasn't a trouble maker; he was always quiet. But he got into a situation that he can't get out of. My mom feels as though she didn't do as well with him as how she's doing with my sister and me. I always let her know she raised him well it's just she can't be there to control his every move. He's a grown man. Also I know he sometimes feels as though he let my mom down. But in life you never know what's in store for you in the future. Things just happen.

Every three months we visit him, put money on the phone for him every two weeks, and put money on his books every Friday. That's a lot of money coming out of my mom's and grandfather's pockets when she still has my sister and me to provide for. Also, my nephew comes over on weekends and my niece comes to live with us for three months at a time, so that's two more people she has to support. Then she has to pay for a lawyer. It's a lot being put on her shoulders.

Money is the big issue when my mom has bills and children besides my brother to take care of. Then it stresses her out because she's always trying to make sure she can do for the three of us to make all of us happy. We can't enjoy our own lives because of my brother. It's sad but true. I try not to let it bring me down but sometimes I just wonder how my mom does it. She's so strong and motivates us to do well and succeed in life because she doesn't want us to end up like my brother.

Now that my brother is in jail reality has sunk in for me. I understand what it's like to struggle and go without. It also has taught me to be independent, and when no one else is there you'll always have family. Mistakes happen, I don't fault my brother for anything. It's just I hate that he stresses my mom out and has her worrying. In conclusion, when a family member is in prison, he or she brings the whole family to jail with them.

PLURALISTIC IGNORANCE ARIANA NEWMAN, MCMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

"You have 60 seconds left on this call," the annoying operator said as I was in the midst of a deep conversation with my brother, Gordon Anthony Newman Junior, an African American male with light caramel skin and short cold black hair speckled with gray streaks and permanent inked arms. One reads "Ariana." We always ignored the little irritating bitch, with her three interruptions: the 60 second reminder, the 15 second

reminder, and the “this call is being recorded.” They were, from my perspective, pointless and a conversation barrier. It’s like the operator stopped our process. She interfered with the depth of our bonding time. We only had a certain amount of time to talk, a mere fifteen minutes, and her short reminders made them even shorter. It was more than an operating service reminder: it was an obstacle, a blockade, an audible and constant reminder of the distance between my brother and me. Although, my brother and I were never as close as Marie and Donnie Osmond, honestly I don’t believe I was given the chance to obtain this sacred relationship. By the time I had my first boyfriend, got heartbroken, and needed a big hug from my only brother, he was already 212 miles away. The reason for the distance was because he was incarcerated and I wasn’t. He was caged and I was free, and there was nothing I could do about it, but enjoy our conversation. Because for those 15 minutes he was mine, he was listening to me, and I could do without the operator and her smart ass reminders. And as our 15 minutes ended, I thought of the way we paused and just continued as if nothing happened, as if the third robotic individual was not there. Not a beat was missed, a word skipped, or anything. The annoying reminder couldn’t stop us or our conversation.

I decided to write my research paper on incarceration of my black men: the males who have protected females most dear to them, the fathers who had to feed their children, the brothers who will not release information to keep another brother down, and for my brother, a man who over the years has grown to be my best friend and most priceless mentor. Not only did I want to address their incarceration, but their rehabilitation and the vital role that rehabilitated men would have in society. I was aware of the high incarceration rates, but wanted to know why the penitentiaries and prisons have more African-American males ages 20 to 34 (DeShay, 2007-2009) than any university, any job, and most importantly any home. Inside the gates of prison, black men are restricted and confined in cages like animals. Many, like my brother and his friend Curtis Ray Davis, are expected to die without ever seeing the outside of Angola State Penitentiary. They have even nicknamed the men “lifers” who lost the rest of their lives in a decision made by a person toting a gavel and wearing a gown, a crew of white collars and briefcases in a district attorney’s office, and the people whom we elect who make laws that cater to one certain population. I had previously met Curtis Ray Davis Junior, a prisoner of Louisiana State Penitentiary, when visiting my brother at Angola. In the crowded room of reuniting families and men in blue jeans and white shirts, I believed I sat at the table with two of the most interesting men that Angola has ever housed. Gordon always came to the table, hugged and kissed us, and if Curtis was around he would beckon for him to come over to where my father and I sat and listen to them profess their plan to target the senators, representatives and any other political figure that could at least pay attention to their testimony and plea of innocence. I always admire them because they never lose hope. They always have a plan, and if it doesn’t go as planned, they go back to the drawing board.

I wrote a letter to my brother explaining the topic of my research paper—the incarceration of my black men and their rehabilitation—with the prime example being him, his story, and his rehabilitation. Although, I knew my brother was serving life, the reason why he was behind bars had always been shunned from me. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander gives several reasons why families hide or even lie to themselves about incarceration of family members: families blame themselves, others claim that a loved one’s criminality is private, and some relatives, especially church-going-God-fearing mothers, are ashamed (61-72). This type of sick, crippling phenomenon has plagued the black community and been described in the psychological literature as *pluralistic ignorance*, in which people misjudge the norm. So, also in my letter I asked my brother to give me the full details of the reason he was serving a life sentence. I wanted to know not just to give correct information in my research paper but to answer some questions out of my own curiosity in order to not to be a victim of pluralistic ignorance.

Gordon is the son of a gambling mother and our functioning alcoholic father, who soon divorced after Gordon was born. After being sent to a family member’s house to live, he began to create a tough exterior, eventually

getting expelled from almost every school he went to for fighting and/or something of that matter. “I never had siblings to catch my slack, so I had to be extra hard,” Gordon wrote.

In middle school, my father sent for my brother only because the relatives he had been living with had passed away. “He was a great provider, a loving and wonderful dad, but he is not really a good teacher (an essential element for a parent),” Gordon wrote. While he was starting a gang, selling drugs, smoking weed and everything else that a 7th grader had no business doing, my father continued to pick him up from the Juvenile Bureau or the Youth Study Center. Being a thug was the coolest thing at the time (as well as now). It was glamorized in the movies and even more so in the music, and all females wanted their own personal thug. And my brother, not being an individual with a mind of his own at that time, decided to be a thug, and like anything he puts his mind to, he committed himself fully. He writes of how stupid he was and that the same negative influences continue to perpetuate young black men and destroy our communities.

Our father pulled strings to get his only son into his alma mater, the all black boy Catholic high school, St. Augustine. But the nuns and the priests praying to every saint could not change my brother’s ways. He eventually got kicked out of St. Augustine, and he became a serious crack cocaine dealer when he was recruited by one of the most violent gangs in New Orleans.

After a failed intervention and a sudden move from Louisiana to Georgia by his Godfather, his mother intervened; Gordon looked like he might have gotten his life together. Then, trouble came knocking at his door again. He fell back into his same patterns, with new schemes to make him the best, the richest, and the worst. Gordon wrote, “Eighteen years old, and I was already a menace to society. I was all the way out of control, snorting coke and heroin, popping pills, hanging in the clubs all night, partying 24/7, having fun. Life was a big game. Either death or incarceration were my only options.” Thank God, it wasn’t death. He may be incarcerated, but I can still have a conversation with him, hear his voice, appreciate his hugs, and I am overly grateful for his advice and mentorship.

On April 18th 1995, my brother was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was an eyewitness to a murder that he got pinned for, and his life as a free man eventually was taken away from him. Although his capture was a wild goose chase all over the country, and he even had a near-death experience, I believe that my brother had to face a punishment for the trouble he has caused, even though he did not commit the crime for which he was convicted. He is currently serving life for 1st degree murder at Angola State Penitentiary.

Although his sentence is extremely hefty and his punishment may be unbearable for a free person who has not had his rights stripped away, their home abandoned and gone through the loss of most of their friends and family, yet the most important part of his incarceration is his rehabilitation. He needed to be rehabilitated. He needed to be changed and converted. Over a decade of incarceration and rehabilitation, I believe my brother is able to be released into society.

Not just because he is my brother, but also because he is a rehabilitated black man, that if released into society he could help tremendously. For example if he meets a single mother, he can help teach her kids to avoid the path he took, and he can also be a mentor to others. If all rehabilitated black men who are willing to make a change in our community would be released, the black community may have a chance to revive itself.

Louisiana’s governor, Bobby Jindal, stated that more than 90 percent of Louisiana’s prisoners will be released and re-enter the public. Capitol News Bureau writer Jordan Blum wrote in response to that fact that much of the focus should be on better preparing offenders to re-enter society while working to improve the state’s parole and probation system. We need to make sure we have the capacity to lock up those who need to be locked up. An inmate at Louisiana State Penitentiary writes in an anonymous essay on what his purpose is at the penitentiary:

Theoretically, punishment should seek to achieve the following goals: incapacitation, rehabilitation, retribution, deterrence, and re-entry.

Incapacitation is the removal of the offender from the community to reduce the threat of crime. Rehabilitation is the re-socialization of the offender towards more socially acceptable behavior. Retribution is the repayment of damages and loss. Deterrence is the discouraging the public from criminal behavior through effective punishment of offenders. Re-entry is the re-integration of the offender back into mainstream society, unless death has been deemed the appropriate punishment for the crime committed.

Incapacitation, the removal of the offender from the community to reduce the threat of crime, is the initial arrest of the criminal. The incapacitation of someone convicted of a crime may be correct or incorrect. For example, the convictions of Gordon and Curtis were incorrect. Therefore, the actual assailants of the crimes these two men committed are still in the community, and they continue the threat of crime.

Retribution is the repayment of damages and loss, one of the hardest goals to achieve in the punishment of incarceration. Many African American felons are serving life sentences for murders, assaults and drug charges. These are crimes that could never go into a payment plan for damages and losses. The breath, the touch and/or the love from one a family has lost will never be able to be reimbursed, like an unpaid bill. The innocence of a young girl that has been stolen will never be given back, like a borrowed gift. The incalculable amount of drugs pumped into a community harming thousands of men and women will never be able to be seized, like a recalled drug from the Food and Drug Administration.

The last two goals to be achieved, rehabilitation and re-entry, are the ones that are lacking severely in the current system. Rehabilitation is the re-socialization of the offender towards more socially acceptable behavior. This is where the Justice System fails us. The ways to be rehabilitated can be religion, education, trades learned, and other vital sources offered in prison. The convicted “lifers,” some of whom have been convicted as young as 15, have surpassed their punishment in any normal human eyes. For the mistake a 15 year old made, he must try to repay for the rest of his life behind prison walls. He will never be able to reenter society as a free man again. This is the first way that incarceration fails as a source of punishment. Also this is the point of *pluralistic ignorance*, of the Justice System, that misjudges the crimes of many innocent and rehabilitated men. To keep them incarcerated is not ethical.

Just like the annoying operator monitoring my brother’s and my conversation, there is an operator monitoring the black community, and just like the automated interrupting reminders the telephone operator gives, the black community has reminders also. Of course they don’t repeat her reminders verbatim, but they monitor the incarceration rate and remind us of our constant losses to stone cold walled prisons. These losses are being monitored by organizations such as the Pew Center, which has recorded that Louisiana has the nation’s highest incarceration rate per capita, with one in 55 adults in prison. The operator doesn’t give us second reminders, but in the black community, the second, more threatening reminder is the reality of those we lose to the grave or to the prison cells. But, just as my brother and I do not pay attention to the telephone operator, and he does not apologize for her butting in our conversation, since she is his uninvited guest, the black community similarly ignores and puts up with the high incarceration rate. We ignore it; we continue on with our lives not as if we have just lost a young male who could have had a wonderful family, a prosperous career and a vital member of the black community.

In the book *Salvation: Black People and Love*, the acclaimed visionary author and intellectual bell hooks writes: “If Black leaders, mostly male, continue to ignore the valuable contributions to the stability of Black family life made by caring single mothers, they will undermine and ultimately destroy the valuable and essential contributions single mothers make as they strive to create healthy homes for themselves and their children.” We cannot continue to ignore her little reminders, we cannot continue to leave our single mothers, children and siblings

relying on pluralistic ignorance, as what my brother did. And most important we cannot go on as if we did not lose a mind and/or body to a devouring black hole called a prison. We have to take the time to understand why the little pause is necessary to pay attention to and as the operator continues to remind us of the time we have before our “call or our community becomes barren.”

“My last memory of you was around Christmas time in 1994. I went out and bought you all kinds of expensive toys from the Riverwalk. When you came in the house, you saw them and ran and jumped in the toy box head first, and all I saw were your little feet dangling,” my brother wrote in the letter. This statement made me think—what would have happened if he had never gotten arrested. Would I be spoiled and always relying on my big brother to get me out of trouble? However, I will never know. Instead, I am blessed and grateful to admit that I do have a brother. He is my best friend and a prized mentor. Of course, I wish I could hug him, call him to pick me up, and I would love for him to see me perform on stage. A few weeks ago, I visited my brother in Angola, and the most disheartening part of leaving was that he could not come home with me. Although the incarceration of my brother was his path to rehabilitation, he could be a vital member of the black community if he could be released.

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DATING THUGS

BY BRYANNA SCOTT, MCMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

“You can’t leave the baddest chick, just for another average bitch,” were the words I told my 5’ 9” caramel gangster. While staring at all of his tattoos, which might I say turned me on to the highest point, he replied, “Bry you know what it is, please chill.” I loved his gangster mentality. He was mine. I don’t even know what got me to that point, but something about him sent a chill through my body. I loved everything about him: what he wore, the way he talked, the way he lied, and surprisingly the guns he carried, and even the fact that he sold drugs.

We grew closer and closer to each other. One day I got a phone call: “you have a collect call from the Orleans Parish Prison.” I already knew who and what this call was about. This wasn’t my first call from him in jail, and it surely wasn’t going to be the last. I didn’t even have to ask what he went for this time because I knew it was the same thing: distribution of drugs. For some reason this didn’t bother me. I really didn’t care that he was in and out of jail, that his “job title” was a drug dealer, or that even when I was around him I had to be cautious. I pushed all those worries to the side, and none of that mattered. Feelings started to get deeper and deeper. When I told myself I didn’t love him, I was only lying to me.

1 out of 3 black men have some type of dealing with incarceration. This issue really affects women. How could we ever find a good companion if this is the reality of our lives? When I was younger, DARE programs at school taught me it was bad to do drugs or even be around them. Now, as a teenager, I see that it is almost

normal for someone to know or even date someone who does drugs or sells them. I went from being a little girl who assumed drugs were bad to being a young woman who wants to deal with somebody who deals drugs.

I really don't remember the crossroad of what made me decide to talk to him, even though I knew his situation. I guess it just happened. I mean cigarettes are legal and give people cancer, which can cause death, so me dating a drug dealer is no different from me dating the CEO of Marlboro cigarettes.

I spoke with someone whose situation is somewhat similar to mine. She'd rather I not say her name. She is dating a black male who is 19 years old, and he is in jail for distribution of heroin. She has been dealing with this person since she was 14, and she is now 17. She stated, "I don't care what anyone thinks. Nobody but me has to deal with him and his situation. There are not enough jobs for everyone, and some people just choose to take the rough way out." I then asked her what her parents had to say about her dating someone who is incarcerated, and she said, "Of course they didn't like it one bit, but I can't care less what they have to think about my situation—it's my life."

I spoke with another young lady by the name of Shanda. She is 18 years old, and her boyfriend, who is in jail, is 19. She said, "I would rather him be locked up and talk to him every once in a while and see him every Wednesday instead of him being out in the world and get shot or killed." She also said, "We can't turn our backs on men who are in jail. Everyone deserves a chance. Maybe it was their best bet to go to jail. Everyone does their dirt—even some crooked police officers—so it all boils down to some people get caught and some don't."

Now it comes down to my mom's point of view. She knows who I'm dealing with, and she doesn't like the fact that he sells drugs, but I mean what mom would? I think she understands because she went through the same thing with my father living "that life." Still, she doesn't want me to go through what she had to go through or even make the same mistakes she made. But I am growing up, and I have to learn on my own now and grow from my mistakes.

There is this book called *Love Locked Down: A Novel About Women in Relationships with Incarcerated Men*. The question has always intrigued me: why do women date men who are incarcerated? I have known very smart, beautiful, accomplished females who date men who are currently locked up. It is more women than you might imagine. When I really started to ask around in my circle, ALL my girlfriends knew somebody who was caught up like that. I know women who are very satisfied with their locked down/up relationships much in the same way that couples can live in different cities and connect. In a dialogue online, I also found somebody who disagrees with this. She said, "I'm blown away at the number of educated women dating prison men. Make no mistake, everyone should be given a second chance; but when you're dealing with repeated offenders, there is something mentally wrong. . . . And the worst part is that these women are sometimes meeting these men while they're incarcerated doing hard time, and they are being loyal/faithful until they get released. You're basically meeting a complete stranger for the first time that will be released in your custody. That's just stupid. I mean how educated are you?" Her screen name was Christian Speaker.

As you can see there are so many different opinions about this topic, and it can go on and on forever. In New Orleans, black young incarcerated men interact with our culture. It affects everything we do. It's some people's way of life. It also affects the way black people communicate with each other. It's something that we cannot escape.

WHOM TO HATE, WHOM TO LOVE

CHERELLE PALMER, McDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

Milton Lewis Jr. is no doubt just like his father. I never actually knew his father, but I heard about him—and the drugs and fights and divorce from my mother. Young and imaginative, my brother was the best person to be around. From having a feast of spaghetti pizza to dancing to the “tootsie roll” song, my brother and I were the best of friends. Together, we made the fun. I remember crying laughing at him when he used to play “Ms. Pac-man” with me. The ghosts always seemed to catch Ms. Pac-man before she ate all the pellets. He would always complain and yell, “They cheating, they cheating! You saw them Tutty? I know you saw that! I pressed the down button and she went up! They cheating!” No matter how I was feeling, he was there to make me laugh. From playing the racing and final fight video games to the dinner table, he had his crazy way of lighting up the mood in the room.

As we got older, we became closer. He turned twenty, and I turned seven. At seven years old, I was too wise for my age, but we still played like we were idiots. We never fought like a normal brother and sister would, and I guess at that age, I figured his time was short to spend with me as it was, so there was no point in fighting with him. Like I said, I was too wise for my age. He and my sister always had stupid little fights, and I never understood why she disliked him so much.

At this point in my mother’s life, she married for the second time to my dad. My sister’s father and our momma divorced after they had her. I never got to meet him or see him. After asking my sister about him, she would always say something about him and his drugs and how he went to jail. She made him seem like such a bad person, until one day she told me that he was never there as a father, for her nor Milton. I guess that was the end of that conversation with her; I didn’t want to know any more than what I had learned.

One day turned into weeks of not seeing my brother. After a while, my mother finally told me that he was taken to jail. A few years after that, he got out. The next couple of years, I heard that I was an auntie and that he and his baby momma were living with the baby momma’s parents. The baby was turning three, and she was coming to visit my parents. Seeing her for the first time, I immediately thought of Milton. The drama started to unfold when my mom started to receive phone calls from the baby momma referring to Milton drinking and hitting her. As the drama unfolded, Milton wound up back in jail.

Years passed before I found out that she bailed him out and allowed him back in her house, which I couldn’t understand for anything in the world. If a man was hitting on me and drinking both in front of my child and in private, he would have still been in jail. Hopefully something in him would have clicked and he would change.

It is now May 2009—the month that will determine where in life I go from high school. I haven’t seen Milton since I was young. I heard from him recently because my mother and I called to wish him a happy birthday. I’m not surprised that this is his third or fourth time in jail in Iowa. I guess he was home when I talked to him. As I was talking to him, he kept saying I sounded old. Well you can imagine my answer. “Well, if you’re 31, Milton, how old do you think that makes me?”

He answered me saying, “I don’t know Tutty. How old are you now?”

Not surprised at his question, I simply answered, “I’m seventeen.”

“Lawd girl you sound older than me.”

All I could do was laugh because it was just like him to say that. I was just thankful to hear his voice and know that he was okay.

Hearing his voice triggered a sad memory. I remembered at that moment lying in bed staring at the dark. The dark became my enemy as I thought of my brother, sitting in his cell looking out the window. I remember thinking about the old times and how much they had changed. Then I thought about how everything had changed. I started to cry lying there. The more I thought of my brother sitting in a jail cell or doing drugs, the more I imagined seeing his body lying in a casket or seeing him in the hospital from some stupid decision he decided to make. The tears came down like hail from my eyes, and I began to bawl. It wasn't loud enough for my parents to hear, but it was enough to cry away the pain I felt that very moment. I couldn't bear to see him in any ill form. I can barely stand to see a dead body in a casket, so if something like that happened to him, I wouldn't be able to force myself to go to his funeral. You would think after being in jail for the third or fourth time, a light bulb would flick on, and he would change for the better, but what can I expect from someone with such a grim background?

I also remember not too long ago, a story my mom told my sister and me. She explained that Milton had come in one day, and he smelled like either crack or weed. She ran him out the back door and trapped him at the front door. With me swimming in her stomach, she beat him. After all that, my sister painfully explained how she watched momma take his hands and press a knife against his fingers until he bled. I guess she was teaching him a lesson. My momma must have been hard on him. Well, what mother wouldn't have been?

In my Students at the Center class for Bard College, the current book we are reading is *Brothers and Keepers* by John Edgar Wideman. It is about two brothers who are the complete opposite of each other in life. One is a fugitive, and the other is a novelist. They seem to be connected strongly. The story mainly focuses on the author's younger brother, Robby, and how his decisions led to a sentence of life in prison. As soon as I read it, this story made me think about Milton. Because of some of his decisions, he keeps winding up in jail. Because of my relation and bond to him, I can't help but to feel sorry for him and try to help him, but what can I do? I'm seventeen years old with a hope to attend Dillard University on a full scholarship, because I don't have any money. How can I do for him, if I can't even do for myself? I love my brother, but at the same time I feel as though he left when I didn't expect it. I didn't even know he was gone. The cruelty that he experienced as a child made me hate what he was becoming. The worse he got, the longer it would be for me to see him and to share what we once shared. So I hated what he was becoming, and I loved him for what he was.

You can't blame him though. He didn't have a real father in his life to show him what he should and shouldn't do. If I didn't have a father, I probably would wind up doing some similar things. I probably would have tattoos everywhere. As mean as it sounds, my brother was the only male influence in my life when we were together. My daddy was always a daddy, but Milton was a real close sibling. I would say he is closer than my sister. Should I hate myself for not being someone that he could relate to so maybe he wouldn't have done the things he did? Should I hate myself for not being a better sister, even though there wasn't much I could do? Sometimes I wish I could just give him money and a good paying job so he can be successful. Sometimes I pray that somewhere in jail, during some time he will come to his senses and realize that the decisions he made shouldn't determine what he should become, because he isn't Milton anymore. He's not the Milton I knew and loved.

When my sister felt I was old enough to understand her dislike for our brother, she told me that he stole her class ring. I sat there thinking, "I would have been mad too, but not enough to not talk to him and stuff." What a crazy reason to dislike someone. I could see if someone you didn't know stole your class ring and wanted to make your life a living hell. That would be someone to hate, but your own blood? I don't question that now, because I know for a fact that you can't even trust your own blood. I can relate to how she feels one hundred percent, but hate is such a strong word.

In Carol Gilligan's essay "Woman's Place in Man's Life Cycle," it is stated that "Different judgments of the image of man as giant imply different ideas about human development, different ways of imagining the human

condition, different notions of what is of value in life.” This is the basis of what I am explaining about my brother. Explained, it simply states that different views of the representations of man as giant involve different thoughts about human development, different ways of guessing the human condition, different ideas of what is important in life. I love my brother; I really do. He could be something so great; he has so many talents. He could’ve been a giant, but hanging with the wrong crowd, smoking, drinking, and jail-time messed him up. It’s not too late for him, but I feel that he has basically given up on himself.

I feel that my brother is trying to play two roles. When he comes home and he talks to the family, he isn’t a bad person at all. He is what we all remember him as. Although none of us has seen him since I was small, his voice is just a little deeper. He asks the same questions and does the same things. He is no different from what I can remember, but the drinking, smoking, hitting people around—it’s just not him at all. He has turned into a completely different person. Now I both love and hate him. He is two people in one. If he ever hit me, we would fight. If I saw him drinking, I would throw the bottle out. If I saw him smoking, I’d stomp it out. The drugs turned my brother into a woman-beater. How would it look if I was successful in my career, making a lot of money, and my brother is an alcoholic-woman-beater? How would it look if I was donating money to companies, African children’s funds and organizations, but I’m not even trying to help out my own brother? The old people used to say, “Put family first.” Not all my family members are saints, and some of them I don’t even talk to. I would take my brother over all my sisters. He is just a down-to-earth person, and I don’t get along with them like I get along with Milton.

I also feel that maybe I am the only one besides my mother who can talk some sense into him. Maybe he would have been different, if I was an older sibling instead of what I was to him. Maybe he would have put down the bottle and quit smoking, if he saw how much it affects me. Maybe if I talked to him face to face he would change, but I am scared. I’m scared of how he looks. I’m scared about what he has turned into. Only thing is, I don’t know what kind of effect my fear will have on him. I hope that when we finally get to talk, he will be better. I could hope and pray that he would get better, but I feel that he is so much a part of me; I won’t get better until he gets better.

In reading an excerpt of *The Qualities of a Prince* by Niccolo Machiavelli, I can relate my brother to it. “And in peacetime he must train himself more than in time of war; this can be done in two ways: one by action, the other by the mind.” By training himself, he can learn what is right and what is wrong. I think that maybe my brother is just trying to find his way in life. “. . .for a man who wishes to make a vocation of being good at all times will come to ruin among so many who are not good.” Maybe my brother isn’t concerned about being good. Mankind has such a narrow view of what is good in this life. “. . .all men, when they are spoken of, and particularly princes, since they are placed on a higher level, are judged by some of these qualities which bring them either blame or praise.” Therefore, Milton is being judged for all the wrong he is doing, and in spite of it all, I can only think of him as he once was.

I won’t lie. I am definitely not the same person I used to be five years ago. I have gotten worse and more grownup. I have experienced a lot more, including losing material things in my life I held dear to my heart. I make good grades in school; I sing in a couple of choirs; I am always doing more for others than for myself. But all these things make me no better than him. If Milton will apply himself, he can be whatever he wants.

I'M SORRY

BY GERNINE DORSEY

Part 1

Growing up I was the first girl, the first granddaughter, the first sister, and most importantly, the first daughter, so you can only imagine how much everyone adored me. I was the first girl of three boys. Yes, I have, or should I say *had* three older brothers. Imagine how hard that was for me, being that older brothers are so protective of their little sisters. My brothers spoiled me, giving me anything and everything I wanted.

My parents had my siblings and me in a bubble, shielded from the real world, the poverty, the 'hood, the poor, the homeless. I thought those things only existed in the movies I snuck and watched. You know, the movies with the 12-year-old kid slinging dope, the men using guns to kill people, the crooked cops, the people living under bridges—yeah, those movies. I wasn't allowed to watch those. My parents told me they were fake and gave wrong impressions of the world. That didn't stop my brothers and me from watching them though.

I was living the life until I was 7 and one of my brothers got hit by a car. He was killed instantly. His killer was never found. I don't think the NOPD (New Orleans Police Department) even cared to look. They gave up too easily for me. I'm not convinced they tried hard enough. I believe they felt like another black man off the streets—job well done. My brother's death really affected me because I loved my big brother more than anything.

After my brother's death things changed in my family. We became distant, and I went into a deep depression and had to seek counseling. My parents began sleeping in separate rooms, my other brother began rebelling, and we weren't a normal family how we used to be.

A year had gone by since my oldest brother's death. I was eight, and my middle brother promised to take me to the skating rink, Airline Skating rink to be specific. He said he wanted to spend quality time with me because I hadn't been the same since my eldest brother Peter's death. I said okay and got all excited, until he called an hour before our date and said he got stuck at the library with school work. Of course I said okay, "school first. We can go next week." I thought nothing of this because our parents were hard on us about our school grades. But about four days later the police knocked on our door saying they needed to pick up my brother. They "claimed" he was involved in a murder on the past Saturday. Turns out my brother never visited the library. He ditched me to hang out with his no-good friends.

During his trial I always believed he was innocent. I just knew my brother wouldn't lie to me. I knew he was at the library but then the video tape was shown. The tape contained a video of my brother's friends killing a man, and since my brother was there, he was just as guilty. Bam—accessory to murder.

Oblivious to the real world, to my surroundings and what went on right outside of the gates of our gated community, I didn't even know what accessory to murder was. Shocker, right? I was living in New Orleans and so oblivious to the reality of my city. I asked my parents, "what are they doing? I thought bad things like this only happened in movies." At that very moment my parents drove my siblings and me to all the parts of New Orleans that I'd never seen before: the lower 9th ward, and the 7th ward across the canal. I saw all those things that I saw in the movies come to life. I then wondered how was New Orleans that big, because I had never in my life seen anything so awful. I only saw the big houses, the nice cars, and sadly, the majority white people. I saw the fancy restaurants and hotels, not the corner stores that sell hot plates and the Motel 6 that had prostitutes going in and out of it. "Are you serious?" I thought to myself. My whole life has been a lie? I couldn't think of

anything to say. I was just quiet. I didn't understand why they shielded me from everything—from real life, from the struggle that my people experienced.

To be honest, I don't even know how long James (my brother) is sentenced. Honestly, I don't care. He is dead to me. I hope he has life. He's been gone for nine years, and up until this year, my SENIOR year in high school, I hated him for that! If he would have just taken me to the skating rink, he wouldn't be in jail, my mom wouldn't cry at the mention of his name, and I wouldn't have trust issues. My family always goes to visit my brother, but I don't. I just try to forget his existence. When he calls, he tries to talk to me, but I refuse. My mom asked me why I was so mad at him because I had never told anyone the story before. I always just had this anger towards James. I told her to ask him, so she did and after that she just hugged me and said "Forgive him." But I can't.

Part 2

I've only talked to James once since he has been gone, but I wrote him a letter after last week's class discussion. My class encouraged me to talk to him and learn to forgive him because nobody's tomorrow is promised. Truth be told, they made me feel kind of bad. In my letter to James I told him how I felt and asked him not to try and contact me any more. My mom told me that my letter made my brother cry right there in the middle of the visitation room. Fuck, I knew he would cry. I cried when I wrote it because he was my favorite brother, and he betrayed me.

James could be paroled for good behavior by the time I'm 22, but that doesn't mean anything to me. He's my big brother, and by the time I'm 22 he will have missed all the most important parts of my life: my first heart break, my first kiss, my first school dance, my high school graduation. Yes, I miss James, but fuck him. He wasn't here for me, so why should I care about him? I do miss him, well I miss who he was. I don't know who he is now, and I don't care—he's no brother of mine.

My oldest brother's death and James being in prison were hard on me growing up. Because of this, I developed trust issues. I didn't trust NOPD because they didn't try to find my brother's killer, and instead they arrested my other brother. And James lied to me and gave me the perception that everyone will lie to me. I don't believe anything anyone says. Maybe these experiences are the reason I can't keep a steady relationship, because I always think I'm being lied to.

Growing up I would look at old family pictures and just think I miss them, but my heart won't let me visit the prison or the graveyard. I talk to my deceased brother every night because I feel like he's still here with me in spirit, watching over me. Also, I think about my imprisoned brother every day, but I'm so mad at him! He's the reason I'm so mean. It's his fault, and I honestly hate him for making me this way. This is the first time I've ever spoken of my brothers out loud to anyone. I'm learning to forgive them as the days go by, but I can only do so much.

My parents somehow think they're the reason for all our troubles, but I don't totally agree with them. Yes, they shouldn't have shielded us from so much, but they had good intentions. I'm not mad at my parents for shielding us because I didn't want to live like those people on the other side of town. I just wondered why they hid it from me. After my 9th birthday, I asked to be pulled out of private school and put into public school, but I never saw a New Orleans Public School because a week before school was set to start, Hurricane Katrina caused my family and me and most of the people in New Orleans to evacuate. I started my 4th grade year, my first year in a public school, in Grand Prairie, Texas. Immediately I was in shock because these children did whatever they wanted. No uniforms, eating in class, all that good stuff (but of course the lunch was better in my old school). I remember after my first day in school I went to the new place I now called home and saw the

realness of Hurricane Katrina. I mean I thought it was all a joke. I thought my parents just wanted us to move because I had found out the truth about New Orleans. But on TV that day I saw people on rooftops, dead bodies, people and animals, and I was in so much shock. I asked my dad, “why didn’t those people leave?” He responded saying they couldn’t afford to.

After that conversation with my father I sat in my room and thought about his response for maybe an hour or so but still nothing. I was confused by his response, so I went back to him and asked, “why they just didn’t get in their cars and go?” Then it dawned on me—they didn’t have cars. The people I saw on TV were the people from the other side of New Orleans. I felt so bad for the people—here I was in a nice new house with food, water, clothes, and a tub, and these people were hanging on for their lives.

After watching that news broadcast my mind immediately went to my brother, and I wondered was he okay? Would he survive this madness in the prison he called home? I had a bunch of questions, but I didn’t ask them in fear of the answers I might get, so I just cried. It may seem I have a lot of hatred towards my brother. Well I do, but I still hoped he was okay in the midst of all this. I mean, he is my brother, and blood is thicker than water.

Despite all the trouble my brother has caused my family, I want to thank him. I want to thank him for his doings. If it were not for his wrong decisions, my youngest older brother Dovon and I wouldn’t have the great relationship we have today. Growing up, Dovon and I were not close because he felt I took the spotlight away from him. Well, I did a little because I was the new family baby, but he still got attention. Dovon is three years older than me, and we we’re always in competition for our parents’ love. We were so stupid because we got it regardless. It is safe to say we didn’t like each other, but we grew close after my eldest brother’s death and even closer after my other brother was imprisoned.

Dovon is everything my other brothers aren’t: he’s smart and wants to make something of himself. He is the only one outside of my mother and my SAC (Students at the Center) class who knows my pain. Dovon and I live thousands of miles away because he goes to college in California, but we still talk every day. Like everybody else he wants me to talk to James. Every night Dovon says to me “you have to take the good with the bad, smile with the sad, love what you got, and remember what you had. Learn to forgive but never forget, learn from your mistakes, but never regret. People change, things go wrong, just remember life goes on.” Dovon uses this quote for everything. He found it on Google by an unknown author and keeps it in his pocket. Literally he wrote it down and keeps it in his wallet. I think it’s his motivation to not let what others do affect him.

Part 3

It’s been about nine months since I first wrote this essay, and I’m feeling a little different about the way I feel towards my brother James, so I wrote him again. I started off by sending him a copy of my first draft of this essay. He replied saying “I’m so sorry Nene (my nickname only he can call me), I fucked up. I made a big mistake, and I will forever regret it. At the time, I didn’t realize how much spending time with me meant to you, and I should have never let my friends come between us. Every day I think about you and wonder how you’re doing and how if I would’ve just took you to the skating rink I wouldn’t be here. Mom tells me how well you’re doing in school, and I can’t wait to see you walk across that stage. Keep making me proud baby girl, and I hope one day you will forgive me.” He wrote some more, but those were the things that meant the most to me.

When he said he “looks forward to seeing me walk across the stage,” I was confused, so I asked my mom about it, and she said ask him what it meant. I decided I wanted to see James. It had been nine years, and deep down I missed him. So my mom and I took a ride to see him. We talked and laughed, and for the hour we were

together in this big visitation room filled with other prisoners and their loved ones, nothing else mattered, and I forgot where we were and that he would soon have to leave me. We were still talking when the guard announced five minutes were left, so I asked him what did you mean when you said you can't wait to see me walk across the stage? His reply was, "I'll be home before your birthday!" It turns out something went wrong and new evidence was found and some other things that I don't fully understand. But once he told me that, I just hugged him and cried and cried. He asked why was I crying. All I could say was, "I'm sorry. I should've forgave you. Our relationship was too strong for me to hate you." He then began crying, saying that he forgave me and that he was just happy that I was starting to forgive him. The bell rang signaling visitation was over, and I hated seeing him, my brother, my favorite brother, being dragged back to his "home."

That visit changed me, and I regret the last nine years of my life. I feel awful. Since that visit, I talk to James every day, and I visit Peter's grave almost every day, and Dovon constantly tells me I told you so, and I have to admit he did tell me so.

TALLULAH HEARING

BY CHRISTOPHER BURTON, FREDERICK DOUGLASS HIGH SCHOOL

The case against "Tallulah," a juvenile prison in the northwestern part of Louisiana, continued the week of April 14, 2003 in Juvenile Court Section F in New Orleans.

Discussions about the appropriateness of private and state prisons for youth in Louisiana have been raging for the past few years. This spring (2003), these debates increased in intensity through three big events: 1) the release of a study on youth incarceration in Louisiana written by the Casey Foundation and commissioned by the Juvenile Justice Commission of the state legislature, 2) presentations at Critical Resistance South, a group opposed to the prison industrial complex, in the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans by activists, including Dr. Angela Davis, and 3) the hearing called by Judge Mark Doherty, Juvenile Court Section F, on whether the courts should continue sending youth to Tallulah prison.

Students in my writing class at Douglass High School have had the opportunity to participate in all of these events this spring. So when we attended the hearing in Judge Doherty's court this week, we were well prepared with background information.

From the hearing and conversations with people who attended it, it is clear that inmates and visitors alike consider Tallulah the worst and harshest juvenile facility.

Witnesses called by the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana (JJPL) ranging from current inmates and youth counselors to experts in the field of youth corrections have made a strong case against Tallulah. Their testimony describes the severe mistreatment of youth by the guards, including sexual intercourse between guards and inmates.

One witness who is serving "juvenile life" (incarceration until the age of 21 for second degree battery) and was formerly a Tallulah inmate, testified that sexual behavior and force are used at all five juvenile facilities he's been in. But at Tallulah, the force and sexual abuse were excessive.

This youth found his way to the infirmary a few times as a result of fighting with other incarcerated youth. However, he also went to the infirmary as a result of being punched by guards. He noted that this was a battery, the same offense for which he was incarcerated. Yet to his knowledge the local police never investigated the report he filed. They certainly never interviewed him or allowed him to have legal counsel to represent him in this or any other prison incidents in which he was harmed or punished.

Inappropriate physical contact of another type happens in sexual situations. This witness testified to having sexual intercourse with more than one female guard. And once he was disciplined for masturbating in the shower, an act he denies. The guard who wrote him up was female and had entered the male shower area even though female guards are not supposed to be in that area.

State attorneys representing the Department of Corrections suggested in their cross-examination that the testimony of this witness was just a matter of the witness's word against the guard's. JJPL attorneys and the witness, however, emphasized that the witness never received any copies of written complaints he filed nor any explanation of the decisions prison officials made regarding his complaints.

Another witness, a counselor at Tallulah who has a degree in Psychology and is doing field work at Tallulah to fulfill requirements for a Master's degree in counseling, testified that the juveniles at Tallulah help themselves, and he's just there to steer them on the right road. Despite the fact that this counselor works with a caseload of only 12-15 inmates at a time, he could remember little about the counseling he offered them. This revelation is especially surprising given that his work at Tallulah is part of his training to become a counselor.

It is clear from the testimony that our state has failed its most troubled youth in many ways. They are often incarcerated in remote parts of the state that require drives of up to five hours for visits from their families, who are important parts of support and rehabilitation. The counselors who work with inmates are inexperienced and unable to recall details of their counseling sessions, even when they have written records of such sessions in front of them. And in too many cases, adults who work at the prison stoop to levels of violence and inappropriate sexual relations with inmates.

The hearing makes clear that something must be done to improve the situation for youth who are incarcerated and that the Department of Corrections has more work to do in response to this and previous cases brought against it.

LOUISIANA WEEKLY ARTICLE

BY DAMIEN THEODORE, FREDERICK DOUGLASS HIGH SCHOOL

"Eenie meenie minie mo', catch a fellow by his toe, and if he hollers let him go, eenie meenie minie mo,"

One of my favorite childhood games is called "It." This game didn't take too much to play. If you were "it," you simply had to run and tag somebody else, and they would then be "it." The game was most fun when I caught somebody who was hard to catch. All of my memories of "It" were fun, until just recently. July 23, 2003 is a day I will never forget. From now on I will forever hate "It."

I was just beginning a day of fun at an out-of-town department store. I was with my 10-year-old cousin. When it was time to leave the store, I rushed my cousin outside. Before I could get to the car, the store's loss prevention officer walked out and stopped my cousin.

"Empty your pockets."

My cousin did as the officer said and revealed the trading cards that he had shoved in his pockets. When I noticed that my cousin had stolen something, I was furious. The officer asked us to step to the back of the store. When we got back there, my cousin was thoroughly searched. I could do nothing but look through the glass window, hoping that this ordeal would be over soon. About three minutes later two officers came to investigate. When they saw my cousin, one of the officers said, "There's the stupid motherfucker right there."

When I heard this, I knew he shouldn't have been talking to my cousin that way. I regret my decision to just stay silent, but that's all I did.

After the officer finished insulting my cousin, he turned to me and said, "Bitch, you better not say anything before I make you sit on the floor."

Again, I sat and said nothing. I guess the officers got mad when I didn't respond to their ignorance, so they began to try to make me mad by ordering me to sit on the floor. I sat, but this still wasn't good enough. They demanded that I sit on the floor Indian-style. At this point I thought the officers' demands were ludicrous and outrageous, so I asked them why I had to fold my legs. And one of the officers said, "You wanna know why bitch? Put your hands behind your back."

When he told me this, I was in a daze. I didn't understand why I was being treated like this. Even though I knew the officers were wrong for what they were doing, I still cooperated. At the time I was arrested, I didn't think I was going to be handcuffed for too long. I was used to watching television shows, like *COPS* and *New York Undercover* where they let some criminals go when the offense is not too bad. I was surprised when they slapped six charges on me.

At this point I was angry. How could they just pin charges on me and all I did was ask a question? I began thinking about how I was going to pay them back for falsely arresting me, but before I could get a full thought off, the whispering of the officers and some of their friends distracted me.

One of the men said, "Aw man you got a big one." Then the other one supported him by saying, "Yeah it must have been hard to get him down." After they finished making their comments they all laughed like hyenas. I felt like a child again, playing the game "it." The only thing is that this time I was the one who was hard to catch. If somebody caught me, he would be congratulated. Now the game was not fun.

"Eenie meenie mo, catch a nigger by his toe, and if he hollers let him go, beat that nigger more and more."

CHILDREN DOING TIME

BY DEVIN FIELDS, ELEANOR MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

For as long as I can remember my dad has always been in my life. He has been there for my ups and downs. Also, he is an extremely hard worker. For the longest he has worked to get my mother, brother, and me all the things we wanted in life, and somehow he always managed to come through for us. As a kid growing up I always figured that he got all his money from working long extraneous hours. But as I got older my mind started wondering why my dad would go out late at night without my mom, when they would usually go out together. But, my adolescent mind had a short attention span, so I forgot about these thoughts quite easily. It wouldn't be long, however, until these thoughts would manifest themselves into a gruesome reality.

It all started on one hot summer day. For some reason on this particular day my dad was very jumpy and had a look of nervousness that even as a child I recognized. The day was proving to be a typical summer day. My brother and I went to camp, and my parents went off to work. The day began to lose its normalcy when my mom said my dad might not be coming home that night, which was strange because my dad always made it a point to make sure he saw me and my brother every night. So we made our way home, ate dinner as we usually did, watched some television, and then my mom put us to sleep. On this night sleeping proved to be a difficult task. My mind was filled with thoughts and predictions about why my dad might not be coming home that night. Then in the late hours of night I heard the biggest boom I have ever heard. I jumped up to find my

mom screaming and my home swarming with men dressed in all black. It was complete chaos. I didn't know what to think or what to do. My mom was in a petrified state, and our house was being ransacked.

In the middle of all this chaos I can remember my grandmother snatching my brother and me up and taking us to her house. I was in a state of shock. I had no clue what had just happened. The days following this ordeal were awkward, and few words were shared between the family, and when they were, it was a secret between the adults. But the strangest thing for me was the fact that I hadn't seen my father.

Then early on Saturday morning my mom got my brother and me up and went to a place I could have never imagined seeing but on TV. We were in the Orleans Parish Prison. We went through what seemed like a million security checks to get to this room where the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. The room was cold, and there was a large glass that separated the room. Once we got settled we sat down. Then a door on the other side of the glass opened, and my dad came through with a look of sorrow and disappointment. My mom burst into tears and went into a mode of hysteria. Then my dad went on to explain what happened and that it was caused by his involvement in the drug trafficking business. At this point in time this all went in one ear and out the other, because I was so young I just knew I wanted my dad back. It wasn't until later in life that I realized fully what happened.

My dad ended up going to trial and serving a little short of one year in prison. I still admire my dad though because he didn't let this mishap break his pride or his spirit: when he came home, he became a better person, and he never looked back on his past and kept moving on towards a positive, legal future.

POLICING IN A COUNTRY WITH IMPERIALIST HISTORY AND CULTURE BY DOMINIQUE KELLY, McDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

While in class, there was a discussion dealing with policemen and their imperialistic behavior. Listening to my fellow classmates' experience dealing with this matter gave me insight and reflection upon an experience dealing with my family and policemen.

At the tender age of four, I was attending Head Start, so I vaguely remember this incident that occurred on the interstate with both my mother and my father. My dad was picking me up from school that evening, and I expected my normal routine to go as planned as it did every day at that time. This is at least what I hoped for. Before getting on the "high rise," the car came to a halt in the middle of the interstate. As I watched other cars passing by, I wondered, "What's going on here?" My dad turned the car off and stepped out of the car, and I thought, "Ok, what's really going on?" Even though I was so young, I still have the vision of looking through the front window of my dad's beige Acura. I do not recall looking out the windows beside me, for fear of getting into trouble. I mostly remember sitting there for what felt like hours.

I soon came to find out my dad had gotten into a car accident, and my mother was out there too. She had come to check out the accident. Little did I know that outside the car, a fight was going on between my dad and a policeman. They had gotten into an argument for some reason. I'm guessing my mom was trying to break up the argument, and while trying to do so, the officer pushed her. Yes, this man pushed my mom. This move shows an imperialistic behavior. Not only was he trying to show he had control and authority over her, but he also did it in the utmost improper way. This led to a physical altercation between him and my dad.

Just because he had that badge he felt untouchable, as if he's the so-called "law." It was obvious that he had no remorse for what he had done, because he pushed my mom a second time. Like I said earlier, I wasn't aware of what was going on, and I'm glad I didn't see this situation occurring. Viewing something like this would not be setting a good example of how a policeman should be conducting himself, which is not abusing his authority.

WHERE TO TURN?

BY ESQUILITA MAXWELL, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

As I stood there looking at my mother's truck from behind the police line, all I could see was the big-ass bullet holes in the side door. The more I counted them the bigger the hole in my heart grew. Then I glanced up, scared of what or who was to be found because I knew what was coming. There he was lying there slouched over in the driver's seat, mouth wide open, head and neck full of bullets, dead to the world. And my heart that once had multiple holes just disappeared. Suddenly my eyes flooded with tears, for I was fucked up in the head because of the last vision I saw of my uncle. My roll dawg! He just sat there quiet not saying anything, which was something he never did. I kept saying to myself, "say something or just walk over and tell me you're ok," but he never did. He never said anything, so I cried harder and harder until finally I collapsed.

As the day went by I cried over and over again, hoping and praying he would walk through the door. Since he never did, I sat there and tried to think what could be the reason his life was taken. I also thought about how that could have been me along side of him had I gone with him the night before like he asked. It always seems like the people whom I'm close to always get taken away from me, and authorities never do anything about it because the victim at hand is black.

Since this whole phase of my uncle being murdered, something appeared again that I thought I got rid of forever. It was the mask I wore during my depressed years. I felt like so much was overcoming me, and I just couldn't bear the pressure any more. So to hide my emotions from my friends and family, the mask was my companion. But I'm tired! Tired of hiding my face because I hate to cry, tired of people taking people from me, or taking things that I believe are mine, tired of getting knocked four steps back every time I take one step forward, tired of wearing this mask!

So what now? Where do I start or go from here? It's three weeks later, and every day the image of my uncle terrorizes me. What do I do about it? I ignore it because I know I'm still taking this hard. So I try to get my emotions back intact and keep on moving.

Here I was again taking that one step forward, but in the blink of an eye my world came crashing down again, and there I went getting knocked four steps back. I had just gotten in from work, and my stepmother said she had something to tell me. After hearing the news of my father and family being convicted for murder, all I could do was hold my head down and think about this tragedy. The only problem was that I didn't know what to think. I was confused because of all the things happening at once. It was happening again. Somebody was getting taken away from me. So much shit was rambling in my head that I was speechless. What the hell is going on in my family? Can someone please tell me? Now I've lost six more family members to prison all because of an out-of-hand situation. Now look at the victim, dead.

My world just doesn't seem real! Never in my life has my family been through so much all at one time. My grandmother feels she can't bear the tragedy, so she just said "fuck it" and tried to put herself out of her misery. What am I supposed to do?

As we followed behind the ambulance different images continuously clicked off and on, like a slide show inside my head. Click, the loud scream of my mother. Click, all the furniture flying past me as I rushed through the house. Click, the blood as I pushed open the door. Click, my mother screaming and reaching for a towel to try and stop the bleeding while screaming for help. The whole situation had me puzzled and in a daze. Instead of me trying to get help or even help at all, I stood there thinking about everything going on around me, thinking

maybe I should just say “fuck it” just like my grandmother, only to succeed in my attempt. But that wouldn’t be the answer, now would it? It would only bring more hurt and pain.

As I sit here in this candle-lit room writing this paper my eyes constantly flood. But it isn’t just emotions I realize; it is that vault of emotions I thought I had sunk a long time ago, floating on the surface and ready to be reopened. As of this moment I don’t know what to think about the things that are happening around me. I can’t even tell you how I feel about the multiple situations that have gone on these last couple of weeks. All I know is I’m not myself!

This person you see is only a body, but not Esquilita.

DEAR BROTHER
BY IEASHA BURNETT, FREDERICK DOUGLASS HIGH SCHOOL

Dear Brother,

Brother, it hasn’t been the same without you. I’m trying to hold my head up out here, but without you things don’t seem to be the same. I miss all the things we did together as a family. Now your momma, sister, brother, son and I sometimes wake up at night, 3:00 in the morning, thinking you’re home. And to make sure I check your room and see if you really are there. Looking in your room, knowing you’re not there is making me more mad.

It makes me want to go out and do something wild. I know what you were doing was wrong, but you had to do whatever it takes to feed your family, pushing ki’s from L. A. to N. O. ain’t no joke, and having 15 years in jail all because of coke ain’t going to work.

You have a son to look after. I remember what you told me, that you will be there for your son and you will do whatever it takes to raise your son. Well how will you be there for him when you’re in jail all the time? And how long will it take for my nephew to be “encore” in the streets, all because he don’t have a father on hand to look up to. Remember when you told me that you aren’t a baby’s daddy, you’re a baby’s father?

I hope when you are in jail you make a change. And why haven’t you been calling me? I know why—because it hurts. Talk to mama just so she can hear your voice. That will make her happy through the whole day and will also help your time go by fast.

OK, brother. I don’t have nothing else to say, but until pen meets paper, I love you and miss you and hope you come home soon.

UNTITLED
BY IVYANNE LONDON, ELEANOR MCMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

I come from a low-income family. I’m also a student at a New Orleans Public High School, where every time budgets need to be cut, education is high on the list.

My family’s main source of income comes from my father’s child support check, which is about \$180 every two weeks. My mother gets a little here and there from her photography, but it still isn’t enough. We often have to budget to make bills month after month. We spend money on what is most important to survive day to day. We aren’t lavish spenders. Instead of buying that nice pair of \$50 shoes, it goes to gas, or the cell phone

bill, or even milk for my little sister. We spend the necessary amount of money to survive. If you spend money on the important necessities that benefit many people, it can be long lasting.

Louisiana, already in a \$1.6 billion dollar deficit, is struggling to balance out the budget for next year and has to cut budgets in certain areas: mainly higher education and healthcare. According to an article in *The Times Picayune* by Jon Miller, Governor Bobby Jindal is planning to have budget cuts reaching \$107 million with \$34.7 million of budget cuts from public colleges and universities. You would think education is higher on the list of an important area that needs to be funded, but unfortunately it's not. Especially after Katrina, education is an area that is constantly being put on the back burner by the government. I'm a high school senior, and cutting funds for higher education affects me a lot, because I am heading to college in the next few months.

It costs \$33,552 a year to attend Loyola University as a commuter. I have a \$62,000 scholarship, which covers \$15,500 a year at Loyola for four years. That means that I will have to come up with the remaining \$18,052 in other aid. That's more money than what my family makes in an entire year, plus some. Without the scholarships or financial aid, I will not be able to receive a higher education, and I fear that this may become an even more serious problem in the future. Tuition prices will rise, and the government will continue to decrease the amount of funds that go toward higher education. The state cut funding for higher education by 29% in 2008, and the proposed 32% will be an addition to the previous cuts for colleges.

Higher education is the start of becoming an adult. You are preparing yourself to start the career of your choice by getting knowledge in the field that you want to pursue. Without higher learning, there are chances that your salary won't be as high in the near future. It seems as though almost every job now requires having some form of education to meet qualifications. By 2018, 51% of jobs in Louisiana will require postsecondary education. Louisiana ranks number 50 in postsecondary intensity for 2018. A job is needed to survive in this world. So why does it seem like the government does not care about the education you need before you can get the job? Long term effects of continuing budget cuts from higher education with higher tuition and additional fees can include: the ability of students to afford college, fewer courses which makes it longer to graduate, and larger classrooms due to teacher cuts.

The government instead prefers to invest money in fixing and shaping the criminal justice system. This is the same system that is so corrupt that it denies John Thompson the right to \$14 million after the STATE refused to disclose evidence it possessed and put him in jail for 18 years for a crime he didn't commit. Once he got exonerated, the judicial system did not grant him the money that he rightfully deserved. This is a system that isn't quick to imprison our own officers that commit crimes. It took six years to finally convict New Orleans police officers Melvin Williams and Matthew Dean Moore of a July 2005 beating of Tremé handyman Raymond Robair. They both were charged with obstruction of justice, and Moore is charged with lying to an FBI agent. There are also two other major federal trials that are still undergoing investigation that involve NOPD.

The government doesn't budget the money properly and, consequently, are putting New Orleans youth at the bottom of their priorities. I'm a part of that youth that suffers because the government is more concerned with cutting spending than trying to raise revenues. I'm not guaranteed a full ride to college, money for food during college, money for books, and just money for being a student who is in college trying to be successful in life.

Criminals, people not trying to make a difference in their lives and become better citizens, receive more money in state budgeting. They are higher on the list than the youth and our education, which is very frustrating because according to studies, the top solutions to help people who have been incarcerated and prevent them from reentering prison include job training and education. Getting an education increases your chances of staying out of prison and not returning. If money isn't spent on improving the prisoners, then why is all of this money going toward correction facilities? The Louisiana State Penitentiary annual budget for the FY 2009-2010 is \$124,035,534.

“Lawmakers closed the notoriously brutal Tallulah youth prison in 2004, mandating that all of the \$25 million in savings follow the youth home, through treatment and diversion programs.” But it never happened. Dana Kaplan, executive director of the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana, says “most of the money ended up with the Department of Corrections—that is, funding the imprisonment of adults.” Once again, our youth are being robbed of the money that we need and deserve. \$8 million of the money simply “disappeared” through budget cuts. How can the government let this happen? Youth and education should be a top priority in the state and this country. Without a knowledgeable generation of youth, there is no future for Louisiana nor the United States of America. I personally think that the Juvenile Justice system should be more of a focus than the adults in the Louisiana State Penitentiary merely because you can build a youth’s mind. These juveniles have time to develop and eventually do something in life rather than someone who is older and in the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

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DEAR JEFFERY

BY J’RENEE COOPER, ELEANOR MCMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Dear Jeffery,

I miss you so much. I know you probably thinking about me writing you, but you know I couldn’t keep you hanging. It’s been a long time since I saw you. I miss seeing your big head and your big feet. Pa-pa been telling me to write you, but I haven’t had time to do so because I’ve been studying and filling out applications for college.

I’m remembering our childhood days we had together. I remember when you, Joc, Piranha, and I went to Cook’s with all those pennies and when you put all those fries on your hamburger at summer camp. That was so funny. I hope you get out soon. You don’t know how badly I miss you. You know the second line was two weeks ago, and everybody came together as a family, but while I was walking I was just thinking of you and how you made those ugly faces. I would have never thought I would be crying writing this letter, but I am.

Jeffery one thing about you is, you always made me laugh, and I never had anything negative to say about you, because people don’t know you like I know you. I know we’ve had our ups and downs, but at the end of the day we always had each other’s back. I would send you some money, but I don’t have a job right now. Plus, I have a budget to pay for my senior year, so be patient. Cousin keep your head up. LOVE YOU!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

THE BEAST IN THE BEAUTY

BY JANAY BARCONEY, MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

I remember that one day in the Calliope housing development, when a man was talking to those five boys about smoking weed and living a thug life. That man was my dad, and he was trying to persuade them to be men—not only for society’s purposes but to become men so that they and their families could be successful. He wanted them to succeed and be better than he was.

That day he was having a serious conversation with those guys. Other times he would be playing around with them. To me, he was just preaching to them like his dad did in church on Sunday mornings.

These kids looked up to him, and they really cared about his opinion and how he felt. These kids were the ones without a real father in their life, their mother didn’t seem to care about them, or they had sagging pants and did what they could to live a life that they saw as good. They all felt like he was a cool, funny, understanding, and compassionate person. They respected him: Everyone did! Even boys who weren’t his sons called him “Pops.”

I am proud that he is someone I know, but I didn’t see him as my father, and I am his biological daughter.

That is the beauty of who he seems to be, but he is also actually a great pretender, a plain, but prolific prevaricator, a used-to-be thug, and, to me, another man in my life to ignore. What the boys saw that day was a side of him they wanted to believe, because he modeled the father most of them wanted to receive. But I couldn’t relate to his exaggerated stories, and the side I saw was not the one everyone else glorified.

What I saw the most was him trying to make sure I didn’t end up like him. I’m not an aggressive, controlling son of all tricks. I didn’t live in the project, so I couldn’t relate to him saying “I have become one of those bricks.” That brick is who he was and was going to be. See, he is a falling dad trying to be a father to me.

I remember once he tried to spend time with me. He took me to the movies and thought I was going to be happy. I smiled and pretended to be happy like my mother told me before we left for the movies. That exact same day we got into a big argument about me living my life and him being so over protective.

And I remember that’s the time he tried to help me get ready for my Sweetheart Ball in the 8th grade. But he failed to see that I didn’t need his help with putting on my shoes. I could do it myself, and if I couldn’t, I didn’t need him.

I never had success in my life with my father because I saw him as the devil’s partner. A part of him is gone and thrown away like a pen that bleeds the sticky black ink. It bleeds from the time he hit my mom because he thought she was cheating, when he smacked and choked me because he thought I was creeping, when he said I wasn’t his daughter when I was only seven. But the part that hurts the most is that he wouldn’t change and become better for us, but he did it for those boys—for them he seemed to change and try and impress.

That is that good funny fat smiling man whom everyone else sees and believes. That’s the beauty, and when I go home I see the beast. That is the beast in the beauty of my dad. Yeah, nothing is all good, but damn, nothing is all bad.

A TIME WHEN I ASKED WHY

BY J'RENEE COOPER, ELEANOR MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

When you think of a child, you think about a child being happy and not having anything to worry about: riding bikes with your friends, playing with baby dolls, baking with your easy-bake oven and all those childhood games. Those things are all the things that I didn't do until later on in my life.

What I mean by that is I didn't have a normal life until I started living with my mother. My mom had me at a young age, and for her to survive she did things that were against the law. But I don't fault her for that because she did it to support me. I was too young to remember staying with my mother, but what I do remember is the clothes, the shoes, the bows, the ribbons, the toys—everything a girl could want. When my mother used to work, I would go by my uncle and his wife. Then one day my mother got caught up and wound up doing time for at least three years. I had no choice but to stay with my uncle, because it was the only place I could go. That's when everything went down the drain.

Getting beat every day was something I had to get used to. People say hitting your child is a part of discipline, which I can agree with, but abuse is not. My uncle was a sweet man. He would play with me all the time, and we would always watch wrestling matches. My uncle was hardworking and was always on the move, so he didn't know what went on in the house except for the bills. Every day he would go to work, and I would stay at home with his wife, and she would just beat me for no reason. She would threaten me if I told my uncle, so there was no point of her stopping. She would beat me with anything she could find: shoes, extension cords, hangers—everything. The beating got so serious to where my teachers called child protection. That was a big mistake, because she beat the charges, and she made me stay in the basement and starve for two days. Melissa was her name. She kept me from my family, abused me, made me starve, and almost made me a bitter person.

I sometimes think about that horrible life I once lived and ask myself why me. I asked myself that for many years. But I realize that part of my life made me who I am today: a strong, humble, and beautiful black lady who will be something in life. Sometimes in life you need to go through things to become a better person, and I am a perfect example of that.

COURTROOM CASE

BY KEVA CARR, FREDERICK DOUGLASS HIGH SCHOOL

They wore red jumpsuits that read OPP Inmate,
And only now think of themselves as temporary jailbait.
As these young boys entered with chains on their feet,
Both looked wondrously out the window. In their chairs swinging,
Red wrist bands surrounded their arms.
They sat in their chairs responding, "Yes sir, yes mam."
One spoke: "I like writing raps.
That's what I'm gonna do when I get out."
I wonder: did the courtroom believe that?
Right hands raised.
Lawyers asked, "Where'd he get animals from?"

On one side sat the defenders, the other side the plaintiffs.
Going at it with objection, objection.
The judge sat in the center saying, “hurry and wrap this up,”
like his whole day was going bad. Behind him was hanging our American flag.
The typist typed as fast as she could.
She still was behind in some conversations that stood.
The look in the boys’ eyes asked, “What they here for,
Watching me like I’m a TV star?”
We left going back to school or to our houses,
These boys were headed back to jail or lockdown.

TO KELVIN
BY KEVA CARR, FREDERICK DOUGLASS HIGH SCHOOL

Keva Carr, a member of a Students at the Center class at Frederick Douglass Senior High School in New Orleans, shared the following poem in a workshop presented with her teachers and classmates at the Critical Resistance South conference on Saturday, April 5, 2004. In the session, she explained to the group that she had sent this and other writings to her cousin, who is incarcerated in one of Louisiana’s youth prisons. Most of the writings she has sent, including this one, have been returned to her, never having been read by her cousin.

Her experiences with her cousin and her study of the Casey Foundation report to the state legislature made her interested in attending the hearing on the youth prison at Tallulah in Judge Doherty’s juvenile court, section F, during the week of April 14, 2003.

To Kelvin,

There were no limits at all to the things you did.
You were my cousin, when I was a confused little kid.
I could picture you in the jail cell holding on to the bars.
Picturing the grass, hearing the cars.
I remember you, braids to the back, head with the hood, caramel skin.
Girls would say “Is that your cousin?” I would say “Who him?”
I only visited you twice, and them two times I went I cannot even remember when.
I remember your mama taking off her jewelry.
I remember walking through beepers, seeing all the security.
I want you to know that I’m doing okay.
I think about you often, but I’m going to be straight—
I know you yearning for the family, cause you have none in there.
I know you yearning for our laughs as we sometimes cry tears for you.
Thinking about your laugh with the crazy things you used to do.
Some people say that you are safe, that this world is getting worse with violence and hate.
Was that what got you in, jealously within?

Violent temper or hate in the heart, damn you away is getting me pissed off.
I don't even have at least one picture of you in my photo book, "You hear me?"
I know you can't, but in reality I'm screaming at you.
Christmas, Thanksgiving, Grandma's birthday just keep passing around.
Damn Kelvin, I wish you were around.
Come rap with me, joke with me, laugh with me, what?
Yeah I see you the type of boy that had to be different, yep that was you.
The type that had to be jolly, on his toes, a busy-body.
Now I close my letter, but not my heart.
You will always be my dawg, my boy, my cousin Kelvin, holla?

—Keva Carr

Follow your own star

VIOLENCE TAKES ON A FACE TOO CLOSE

BY KRISTI COLLINS, FREDERICK DOUGLASS HIGH SCHOOL

"I was 14 years old when I watched NOPD take my dad away in hand cuffs," Mike said softly, using his forearm to wipe a tear. Even though we grew up next door to each other, I'd never seen him cry, not even when he ripped open his leg on the cyclone fence that divided our back yards. He got up from the seat next to me, poured me a glass of water, took a deep breath, and continued with his story.

"I hadn't seen my mom in weeks; I knew she wasn't coming back. My mom had a problem that she had tried to hide from my twin sister and me for years. But as we got older and more aware, especially growing up in the hood, she couldn't hide it any longer."

I became teary eyed too as I thought of how hard his life must have been with his sister just having had a baby and his parents nowhere to be found.

"I waited around for weeks; it had never taken him this long to come home after being arrested. I later got a call from my uncle with my dad on three-way telling me that he would not be coming home for a very long time."

Tears began to stream down his face; he put his head down and said in a crackly voice, "I knew then that it was all on me. I used what I knew to survive."

I pulled my rat-tail comb out of my back pocket, stood up behind the chair he was sitting in and began to braid his hair. He had learned to harden his heart to other people because caring wouldn't help feed the family or pay the bills. To make money, he told me, he would sometimes rob someone or steal a car and sell it for parts. I leaned over to look him in his face. Even though I'd known him since we were toddlers, I was just learning this side of him. As the shocking reality set in, I loosened my grip on his hair for a second or two, being careful not to offend him.

He told me things about life on the streets that I had only read about in fictional best sellers. He told me about a time when there was a guy who had recently gotten out of jail and moved on the block. This new guy was beginning to take almost all of the business and clientele from my friend and his crew. He knew he had to do

something about the situation. He and his friends began to sit back and watch the new kid on the block's every move, figuring out the perfect time to move in and take him out.

I began to feel uneasy to know these secrets. I thought maybe I should just concentrate on braiding his hair; he always came to me to do his cornrows. It was almost like a game to come up with the most creative designs I could think of. But my reaction wasn't just fear and avoidance. Some of me also understood him. He had taken on the same characteristics of a mother, the way that she would protect and provide for her family by any means necessary. Mike never hunted for the sport of it—only because he had to.

I thought to myself, 'No wonder his poetry is always so deep. No wonder it always felt so real when I read it; it was real.' I couldn't believe that for all these years we spent just about every day with each other. He'd rush home from school, and we'd read each other the new poems we'd written. We even slept over at each other's house. He was as close to me as my brother really. How could he have done such violent things without me knowing it?

Despite my understanding of his motives, things have changed between us. Instead of seeing the same old joking, intelligent young man I knew before, now when I'm braiding his hair, I get a chill up my spine. Instead of being relaxed with a friend, I feel like a runaway slave constantly in fear of getting caught. Just yesterday I saw the outline of the small handgun in his pocket. Instead of asking what it was, I kept my thoughts inside and feared not only for his next victim but also for our friendship.

A TIME WHEN I WAS PUNISHED: A FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING BY KRISTI COLLINS, FREDERICK DOUGLASS HIGH SCHOOL

High school: that's when all of my troubles began. I was late for school for the first time this school year, and as I raced up the back stairs, I stopped dead in my tracks. I noticed my best friend standing all hugged up with some boy. I said hey and before I could get through the door a voice said to me, "Say girl, holla at my dog." It was the voice of the boy she was standing with.

"Excuse me," I said turning completely around, noticing for the first time a boy leaning against the gate. I hadn't bothered to notice him before.

"Kristi go talk to him, please," my friend's voice pleaded. I sighed and then said, "Who, him over there?" pointing to the boy, but I already knew who they were talking about. I began to walk towards him.

"Say Wendell dog, oh yeah girl my name Isaac," said the boy who was trying to play the love doctor. The boy on the fence turned around and said, "So what's up with you? You going to give me your number or what?"

I pulled out a piece of paper and a pen jotted down a number and said, "I have a class to attend." I quickly ran up the stairs and through the door.

That weekend, I decided to go to my grandparents' house where I had my own phone line and I would be able to talk in private. I went into my room and closed the door and dialed Jessica's number.

"Hey chick, what's up?"

"Nothing, girl I'm on the phone with Kendell, hold on okay."

I sat holding the phone wondering why she's taking so long to come back to the phone. My thoughts were interrupted by the noise in the background.

“Hello, girl what is all of that noise?” Just then, I heard a male’s voice on the phone.

“Who is you?” I asked.

“My name Kendell,” he replied.

“Who? That boy who was standing outside my school with that Fortier uniform on?”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s me. So why you gave my round the wrong number?”

“Who me? Man I don’t want him calling my house enough to get me in trouble!”

“You want his number?”

“No, well yeah you could give it to me.”

“The number is.....”

“Hold up let me grab a pen. Now what is it?”

“866-8268”

“Alright I’m going to call y’all right back.”

I hung up the phone and stood idly looking at the phone number I had just written on the last shelf in my closet. I contemplated whether I should call him or not. I finally decided to call after about a minute of standing there. I picked up the phone and dialed the number trying to figure out what to say. For a minute, I almost forgot his name.

“Hello,” spoke the voice on the other line with sounds of a video game in the background.

“Hello, may I speak to Wendell?” I asked in a timid voice.

“This me, who this is?”

“Kristi.”

“Where I know you from?”

“I met you at McMain. You were standing against the gate.”

“Oh yeah, now I know who you is. You gave me the wrong number.”

“Sorry, my momma don’t let me get on the phone with boys.”

“Oh, so what’s up with you?”

We talked for a long time on the phone getting to know each other a little better. I warned him that when I went back to my mom’s house, I probably wouldn’t be able to talk to him very much. We made plans to see each other at school Monday. When I got home that Sunday evening, I called him while my mom was out of the house. We talked for a minute, but we still wanted to see each other the next day.

“Hey,” I said to him with a smile on my face.

“What’s up,” Wendell said back to me. His beautiful teeth glistened under the morning’s sunlight along with his freshly braided cornrows and thuggish appearance.

“I can’t talk to you for long because I can’t be late for homeroom, so I’ll try to see you after school, okay?” I smiled gave him a hug and skipped up the stairs to home room.

I daydreamed about him and tried to figure out ways to spend more and more time with him, not knowing the trouble I would soon be getting myself into. I snuck around calling him on the phone for about four months, but it just wasn't enough. One night while we were on the phone, he asked me to come over to his house, and I stupidly agreed.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"I live in Pigeontown"

"In who?" I said puzzled not knowing where the heck he was talking about. I hadn't spent much time getting around on my own—my first time catching the bus was for my second day of school.

"Look, just stay on the S. Claiborne bus to the end of the line, walk across the street to Palmer Park, have a seat on the bench, and I'll be sitting there waiting."

I agreed and hung up the phone. I lay in the bed that night barely getting any sleep, wondering if my mom would find about me cutting school—something I had never done before. The next morning I woke up and got dressed, trying not to look suspicious. I got to the bus stop where I had been instructed to get off and walked across the street to the bench, but he was not there. I began to panic not knowing what to do. Did I get stood up? The questions of doubt ran through my head as I tapped my foot nervously on the ground and the cold wind cut through my coat. Finally, I heard a chuckle from behind me. He was standing there with the same boy who had hooked us up.

"Come on let's go before truancy gets hot."

The walk to Wendell's house was long and cold.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"Man we almost there," said Kendell.

"I wasn't talking to you," I said in a playful manner.

"We almost there, love, be patient," Wendell said in calm voice.

When we arrived at the house, I looked around the neighborhood. He hadn't lied when he said he was from the hood. This was really the ghetto. There were two abandoned houses on the block and an empty lot where I later found out that a scatter site once stood and a bunch of negroes who kept asking Wendell, "that's you dog?"

Once we were in the house, I had a seat on the sofa that was positioned in the center of the wall. It was across from a desk that held an old Apple computer and on the side of a floor model television. There was no one else there but us. The dead silence was broken when Kendell said, "I'm a holla atcha dog." He walked out of the room, and the screen door slammed behind him.

"I'm bored. You got any movies?"

"Yeah, what you wanna watch?"

"I don't know. Pick something."

"What about *The Best Man*?"

"Sure," I said shrugging my shoulders.

I sat thinking about what I would do if my mother found out I was cutting school—especially if she knew I was with a boy. The movie began to play, and he found a seat next to me on the couch. He scooted over closer to me and put his arm around my neck.

“What’s wrong?”

“Who me? Nothing, just wondering where my mom is.”

“Why you keep worrying about that? Why would your momma just pop up out the blue and come get you from school?”

“Man, it’ll be just my luck that she would.”

“Man you here with me now. Stop worrying about that.”

I blocked the thoughts of getting in trouble out of my mind and snuggled a little closer to my boyfriend. As we watched the movie, I experienced my first kiss and more.

“What time is it?” I said as I stuffed the last of my pizza down my throat.

“Three o’clock.”

“Ohh, I gotta go. Come on Wendell,” I said, “you gotta walk me to the bus stop.”

“What about the passion mark on your neck?”

“Ah man, your mamma don’t have no make up?”

“Come on, I’ma ask my sister.”

I raced down the stairs to the front porch where I found all eyes on me. Seated on the steps were his sister, her daughter, and her friend.

“Wendell who that is?” said his sister.

“That’s my girlfriend,” he said with the biggest smile I had ever seen.

“Wendell, I gotta go,” I said nudging him a little.

“Nitra you got something to cover this up?” showing her the passion mark on my neck.

“Damn Wendell you a piranha nigga? What you was trying to do?”

Everyone just stood around me looking at my neck like I was on display.

“Hold up. I got some make up.”

She ran inside and returned with a compact. She tried to cover up the giant bruise that had been sealed to my neck. Finally, we just gave up, and I left the scene of the crime. I raced to the bus stop and luckily the bus was sitting there. I turned around and gave him a big hug.

When I got home and walked through the door, my mom was sitting there on the sofa folding clothes. Before I could get to the next door seal, she called my name.

“Kristi.”

“Huh,” I said still trying to creep through the next door.

“Have a seat.”

I turned around and sat down on the love seat across from her.

“Where were you today?”

It didn’t make sense to lie. Since she was asking the question, she already knew. I hadn’t been at school, so I told her I left school early with some friends, got something to eat, and sat in the park.

“Kristi, don’t lie to me.”

“Momma I’m not lying,” I said with a pitiful look and tears in my eyes.

“I saw Jessica, and she said she didn’t see you at school or talk to you.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just sat there crying, trying to think of the next lie I would tell.

“You were with a boy huh?”

At first I shook my head no, and then I said yes. My mom jumped up and said, “Oh my God you mean to tell me you cut school to go by some nigga? So where did y’all go? His house?”

I shook my head yes.

“What did y’all do?”

I didn’t know what to tell her, so I just told her the truth. She was extremely mad. I could see the anger growing in her eyes the more I told her.

“Get out of my face.”

I walked away slowly with my head down. By the time I had got to my room I heard my mom’s car pull away and screech down the street. When she got back, she said I was punished and that she couldn’t bear to look in my face. I cried for days and realized that was the biggest mistake I could have ever made and vowed never to cut school again.

You know the deal when you are in trouble and you make a lot of promises that you know you’re not going to keep? I guess you can say I didn’t learn from my mistakes, but I just figured out how not to get caught again.

HOW MANY LAST NIGHTS MUST THERE BE BY MARIA HERNANDEZ, FREDERICK DOUGLASS HIGH SCHOOL

I am guilty, because I saw all the signs.

I saw the bruises from when he crossed the line.

I looked the other way, trying not to pick sides.

This is the question that I ask of me:

“How many last nights must there be

Before I throw the towel in and intervene?”

Last night I saw my neighbor rushed away.

She and her husband had a fight minutes after I said “hey.”

Because of him she will forever lay

On a soon-to-be-forgotten hospital bed.
She does not only have a shot to the head,
She's been declared clinically dead.

I've seen death before,
But what really hurt was when he called her a whore,
Although he was the one we'd always seen with other women at the store.

The worst thing is I'm not the only one who knew.
She did, he did, and so did you.
We are almost as guilty as he is, as if we were holding the gun too.

18 YEARS FOR A CRIME HE DID NOT COMMIT BY MALKIA HEISSER, MCMAN SECONDARY SCHOOL

I don't believe anyone is really a fan of people going to prison, but I highly doubt someone objects to someone going to prison as much as I do. I don't support their crimes at all, and yes if they really did commit the crime they need to be punished. But growing up I realized too often that "criminals" are not getting a fair trial. Or, I'm hearing about how they went to jail as a teen, and years later they are finally released after realizing they were innocent all along.

As a little girl the only memories I have of my pawpaw is going visit him in Angola prison. He was there 18 years for a crime he didn't commit. It took 18 years for the courts to finally say he was an innocent man and he is free. 18 years went by without him in his family's life. His children graduated high school without him, and by the time he was released all his kids already had babies of their own. My grandfather and I don't have the best relationship, but I can see the damage of him being absent in his family's life.

He's not really close with any of his kids except for my mother. Probably because she was the only one old enough to have memories of him not in prison. His other kids were too young to really remember him out of prison, and by the time he was released the possibility of building a great relationship was slim to none.

My grandfather is one of thousands of people incarcerated for crimes they never committed. It destroys people's lives. Knowing my grandfather, I believe not being here in the outside world really affected his life. He is very sociable, just not with family. I don't believe he doesn't want to be sociable; he just doesn't know how at this point.

I recently interviewed a man by the name of John Thompson. He opened my mind up to the effects of prison life. He was incarcerated for I believe nearly two decades for a crime he didn't commit. During the interview his oldest son stopped by to talk to us. He was very excited to know that young people are interested in his father's story. He told me how it took a while for him and his father to develop the relationship they have now.

He told me how the day of his high school graduation the courts set that day as the day his father was supposed to be executed. I could tell by listening to him how this was still a very sensitive subject for him. I asked him, "Why do you believe you and your father weren't that close when he was in prison?" He thought a very long time and said, "honestly, I did it on purpose."

At first I was kind of upset that he would do that on purpose. I thought about how I would act if my dad was in prison. I thought that I would go visit every time I could. I would make sure our relationship would stay as

strong as possible. I wouldn't want the system to break up what we had. But after he explained why he did it on purpose I kind of understood where he was coming from.

He said that as he was growing up him and his father's relationship was alright. They talked at least three times a week, and they would always write each other. But as he got older he started to believe his father would never be released, and they would finally execute him. He said that that would be too much for him to handle. Knowing that there was nothing he could do to help his dad, he said that distancing himself from his daddy was his way of coping out. He figured if they weren't that close, then his death wouldn't affect him as much as he believed it would if they were still close.

My grandfather's and John Thompson's are just some of the stories I've heard. I talked to this boy name Jernard, and he told me how him and his daddy's relationship changed as he changed. He said they always had a good relationship, but prison changed his daddy. Instead of his daddy just calling because he missed his kids, he mainly called because he needed money. Jernard said that finally he braved up and asked his daddy why he was changing.

His daddy honestly said that it was nothing personal, but he had to survive, and that was all he was willing to say about that.

Listening to these three different people's stories it just proves the point that not only prison ruins lives, but it's the distance that ruins it, or what people have to "survive" in prison.

HOW CAN OUR SYSTEM EVER BE JUST?: A DEEP-HISTORY ANALYSIS OF JOHN THOMPSON'S EXPERIENCES IN THE LOUISIANA LEGAL SYSTEM BY PHILIP HERMAN, TULANE UNIVERSITY

The justice system is more systematic than just. Statistics reflecting prejudice, misconduct, and abuse of positions of power can be paraded forward to indict every level of the justice system. Still nothing changes because it always appears that we would rather have a criminal justice system than appear too lenient towards those whom the system marks as 'criminal'. The justice system writes the history of the necessity of its own existence. This paper will explore multiple levels of the US justice system throughout history, showing that it simultaneously breaks the law while writing a history that shows how it is necessary that it be immune to the laws it wields as weapons against the people. By using the SCOTUS decision in *Connick v. Thompson* as a jumping off point I will carve a path all the way back to early slave patrols and lynchings.

When John Thompson came to our Tulane-McMain class through Students at the Center, he talked a great deal about what it was like to be falsely accused for murder and live on death row when he was innocent. But afterwards I immediately regretted that we didn't ask more questions about the Supreme Court case that he lost. So I started reading more about John Thompson's Supreme Court case against New Orleans prosecutor Harry Connick Sr. The case was about Connick's failure to turn over evidence that would have proved Thompson innocent to his defense lawyers, which is called a violation of Brady disclosure. Justice Clarence Thomas's write up reads at one point:

A pattern of similar constitutional violations by untrained employees is "ordinarily necessary" to demonstrate deliberate indifference. *Bryan Cty.*, *supra*, at 409. Without notice that a course of training is deficient, decision makers can hardly be said to have deliberately chosen a training program that will cause violations of constitutional rights. Thompson does not contend that he proved a pattern of similar Brady violations, and four

reversals by Louisiana courts for dissimilar Brady violations in the 10 years before the robbery trial could not have put the district attorney's office on notice of the need for specific training.

(c) Thompson mistakenly relies on the "single-incident" liability hypothesized in *Canton*, contending that the Brady violation in his case was the "obvious" consequence of failing to provide specific Brady training and that this "obviousness" showing can substitute for the pattern of violations ordinarily necessary to establish municipal culpability. In *Canton*, the Court theorized that if a city armed its police force and deployed them into the public to capture fleeing felons without training the officers in the constitutional limitation on the use of deadly force, the failure to train could reflect the city's deliberate indifference to the highly predictable consequence, namely, violations of constitutional rights. Failure to train prosecutors in their Brady obligations does not fall within the narrow range of *Canton*'s hypothesized single-incident liability. The obvious need for specific legal training present in *Canton*'s scenario—police academy applicants are unlikely to be familiar with constitutional constraints on deadly force and, absent training, cannot obtain that knowledge—is absent here. Attorneys are trained in the law and equipped with the tools to interpret and apply legal principles, understand constitutional limits, and exercise legal judgment. They receive training before entering the profession, must usually satisfy continuing education requirements, often train on the job with more experienced attorneys, and must satisfy licensing standards and ongoing ethical obligations.

This passage can tell us a great deal about how the Supreme Court came to its decision. According to Clarence Thomas (who is writing for the majority vote that decided in favor of Connick), the accusation of a Brady violation must prove that the city trains its employees in such a way that leads to such constitutional violations as a Brady violation (this failure of 'training' became the basis for the city's culpability in the precedent set in *Canton v Harris*). Prosecutors are because of the 1971 *Imbler v Pachtman* case immune from 42 U.S.C. §1983 suits that hold people responsible for violating a citizen's rights. So in order to prove the prosecutor guilty it must be done on a municipally negligent level (i.e. that he failed as city employee to create policy that instructed employees on how to not violate people's rights). This means that in order to accuse someone of a Brady violation you need to be aware of other Brady violations so that you can show a pattern that is reflective of improper 'training'. Thompson was arguing that his case was similar to *Canton v. Harris*, in which the 'obviousness' of the single incident of misconduct was enough to prove that employees were improperly trained. Clarence Thomas argues, in turn, that Thompson's case did not match up with the precedent set by *Canton*. This is because in *Canton* it was police who were failed to be trained properly in the academy, whereas Connick is a lawyer who was trained about ethics in law school even before becoming a prosecutor, so, according to Justice Thomas, his training must therefore have been sufficient prior to even becoming a state employee.

Suffice to say, this logic is all kinds of messed up. First, the fact that the city can only be held liable for violations only if said violations reflect improper training of employees by the city is backwards. According to the *Canton v Harris* case, improper training reflects a city's deliberate indifference to the rights of the citizens. Thus, a city is not responsible for any violations of rights that occur in a city with 'proper training'. Properly trained police (I will use police here as the example since that is who was being accused in *Canton v. Harris*) who shoot an innocent person were just doing their job; mistakes will be made. This logic is indefensible. If we treat state employees who have power over other people's lives like any other job, then we lead ourselves down a dark road. Our police then are only as good as their training modules, just as McDonalds employees are a reflection of the training videos they watch at orientation. The primacy of training as the measure of the city's culpability suggests that men and women are neutral with regard to other people's rights, and it is only the city's training that can impress upon them the importance of not violating people's rights. Yet, it is not hard to imagine that many men and women have violated people's rights and abused power long before becoming a police officer. Perhaps the desire to continue violating people's rights with impunity is even what attracted them to police work. The city is not culpable for the type of person they hire. It is as if they think a person's prior breaches of

other people's rights are completely overwritten by the ethical code imposed upon them in training. The slate is not made blank by training; instead we see a palimpsest wherein behind the letter of the law we see the faded marks of a more sinister and personal relation to the abuse of law and order.

Furthermore, the implication of Justice Thomas's opinion is that multiple incidences of the same type of violation must occur in the prosecutor's office in order to suggest that their training is improper. In our society if you walk outside with a gun and blow someone's brains onto the sidewalk, you are a murderer. That identity is now how you fit in society. You cannot protest, "Yes I know I *murdered* someone, but it was only one single person. Do not call me a murderer." Yet, according to the logic of Thomas's decision, the vocation of prosecutor allows people to sentence others to state-sponsored death and not be declared a murderer until they have sent multiple innocent men to death row.

One miscarriage of justice reflects a bad day on the job; only multiple such miscarriages reflect a corrupt system. This logic again suggests our judicial system treads down a very dark path. It is the path of F.S. Michael's concept of "monoculture," in which everything is viewed through the lens of the singular story of capitalism. From Justice Thomas's opinion, we can see that the judicial system is merely a capitalist corporation, but with jobs unlike any other. These jobs are not reflective of the individual people who occupy the position, but instead reflect the training that all employees receive. The idea that training relates to culpability is entirely based on the idea that standardized training creates a workforce with a standardized relation to the job (i.e.: Bill and Ted are two wholly different people, but because of the similitude of their training their relation to their function as police officers is identical). Yet, reducing the criminal justice system to a capitalist workforce makes it so only the numbers count. Police must, thus, make more arrests; prosecutors must make more convictions. They get paid not to create a feeling of law and order in our society, but to generate results that can be reduced to, and apprehended as, numbers.

More disturbing than all of this though are Clarence Thomas's remarks on why Connick cannot be analogized to the police in *Canton v Harris*. He essentially says that it is impossible for a prosecutor's office to be held culpable for improperly training its employees on the constitutional rights of others. His argument is that police officers are just people who are trained by the city to become police officers in the city-run academy. Prosecutors, on the other hand, are not just people being trained by the city for a specific job, but are lawyers entering a position. The job of prosecutor is contingent on proper training having already occurred in law school. The city cannot be held accountable for training that is indifferent to people's rights because all prosecutors are by virtue of their title of 'lawyer' already always properly trained. Justice Thomas is operating under the assumption that if they were improperly trained, they never would have been able to pass the Bar exam to become a lawyer in the first place. In Justice Thomas's logic, the standardized testing of knowledge acquired in a school on constitutional ethics reflects proper training on the proper handling of these ethics in the real world of prosecutorial law.

Memorizing a fact for a test and knowing how to apply case precedent to an essay answer become sufficient to prove someone knows how to treat the rights of another human being in a real-world situation. This paints us a nightmarish picture of our justice system. Prosecutors, unlike police officers, cannot be held accountable because they were wealthy enough to afford years of private training before entering the workforce. Ruth Bader Ginsburg's dissenting opinion in the *Connick v Thompson* case brings up that an inexperienced lawyer working for Connick "told the jury he did not recall covering *Brady* in his criminal procedure class in law school." She goes on to say that, "a person sitting for the Louisiana Bar Examination, moreover, need pass only five of the exam's nine sections" and that the bar exam has very few questions relating to criminal procedure, especially relating to Brady disclosure. She also points out that District Attorneys' offices have a high turnover rate, so they hire lawyers right out of law school and "promote them rapidly through the ranks." So they have no real-

world training except within the prosecutor's office. Using Ginsburg's logic, it seems clear that the ability to pass law school does not necessarily provide all the ethical criminal procedure training that is necessary.

Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow* clarifies why Thomas's disturbing logic reflects the general US Criminal Justice system opinion on the case. Alexander's research shows that the system is the organ by which national systemic racial discrimination is carried out. It is not *like* Jim Crow metaphorically, virtually, or paradigmatically, but *actually* carries out the functions of racial segregation that could no longer be carried out by Jim Crow laws. As Alexander points out, the criminal justice system can do this without being labeled racist because of our 'colorblind' society. Clarence Thomas, a black man, delivers the majority opinion to declare that the Court sided with Connick not as part of a racist agenda. Clearly, if a black man is the one delivering this decision, then the decision itself must be a colorblind one. The decision is racist and classist. It is based on a white lawyer receiving expensive private training and therefore being *a priori* ethical in person and in training before even becoming a prosecutor. Thompson was a drug peddler at the time of the murder, and Connick is a law school graduate. The decision focuses only on 'training' and not on Connick as an individual (who has had many accusations of corruption and miscarriages of justice). The training is something he bought, and since it is prestigious it is unassailable to claims that it was 'improper'. The person Connick was before he bought this training is not admissible in court. One could argue that this would not matter because it doesn't reflect the prosecutor's office as a whole, yet Connick is the one who hires all the other District Attorneys, so the type of person he is is reflected in the whole office by his choice of appointments. Conversely the person Thompson was is admissible in court. He was a black drug dealer. Why would the Supreme Court let a drug dealer like Thompson ruin the career of a successful, educated white man? He may have been innocent of murder, but as Alexander says, arrests since the War on Drugs-era have had nothing to do with crime rates or guilt, but more with furthering a system of racial segregation.

I cringed and became filled with rage when I read Thompson's *New York Times* article and when he spoke about how his son found out from his teacher about his impending execution. Grinding teeth, palpitating heart, tightly clenched white-knuckled fists is how I have always reacted when reading in a book or watching on TV a story about someone who is falsely accused and no one believes them or when a false hero takes credit for a good deed that the real hero did and no one believes the hero when he tries to claim the deed. I have to leave the room or put down the book. When I was a kid, I feared that I would say something I saw that was real, but no one would believe me and I'd be thrown into an asylum where my strongest protestations of sanity who be taken as lunatic ravings. The more desperately I pleaded to be free, the more they would say how violent I had become. I would end up convinced they were right all along and that I really was insane. I learned as a kid that we do not fear the unknown as so many say but fear what others know. The certitude of others who are acting based on what they know is what causes real life nightmares.

Connick was certain that even if Thompson was innocent, he still deserved to go to jail. Thomas was certain that law school already properly trains a prosecutor. If I was put in an asylum, it would be because they knew I was insane, and everything I did to argue the contrary would only bolster their certitude.

The New Jim Crow of the criminal justice system works on certitude. We *know* the saggy pants black boy must go to jail. We *know* he is a criminal, and we *know* criminals belong in prison. In reality prison only creates criminals and has no function in rehabilitating criminals, and increases in prison population do not correspond to decreases in crime rates. Thus, in reality criminals are not put in prison but come out of prisons, Alexander claims. The criminal justice system acts like a corporation, as Michael's monoculture would predict, in order to carry out its function of racial segregation. By focusing on making arrests and securing convictions (i.e.: putting up high numbers), the criminal justice system is able to arrest black people at ever increasing rates thereby marking them as felons in society. Like the sane man who appears insane to his doctors because of his fervent passion in proclaiming his sanity, the more black people the police arrest only makes the system more certain

that black people are criminals, and the more we *know* they belong in jail the more the police will arrest them. It is a sick cycle. *Connick v Thompson* attests to this because falsely prosecuting an innocent man and refusing to comply with Brady disclosure, according to Clarence Thomas, didn't reflect training that was indifferent to people's rights because just one instance of a Brady violation is only a mistake, and furthermore prosecutorial lawyers cannot even be accused of improper training in the first place.

The Yale Law Journal took up the *Connick v Thompson* case in order to look at the way in which prosecutorial accountability has become a myth. They took note of another of the Court's points. The majority opinion seemed to have faith that ethical violations on the part of prosecutors could be disciplined by their own office and their state bar association, and believed also that holding prosecutors accountable through the Courts was not reasonable because prosecutors do not present a "highly predictable constitutional danger" (Keenan 208). The authors argue that the case set a precedent that "reaffirmed [SCOTUS] commitment to prosecutorial immunity" (Keenan 209). Rather than harping on this precedent as I have thus far, the authors decided to actually see if disciplinary measures in the state bars are able to sufficiently hold prosecutors accountable, as the Supreme Court seems to think. The authors point out that judicial oversight of how prosecutor's offices are run is virtually nonexistent because judges do not want to be seen as violating separation of powers by interfering with the prosecutor's office. Individual prosecutors "exercise almost unlimited discretion over whom to prosecute and which offenses to charge" because pretrial hearings that determine the validity of a charge do not usually act as a reasonable safeguard (Keenan 210). Most pointedly, the authors use Thompson's case to show lack of accountability. The only reason Thompson was proven innocent was after a long drawn out investigation when a lone investigator by chance found exculpatory evidence, but most criminal charges never get such thorough investigations. In fact, most criminal cases are settled in plea bargains out of court, which means even less oversight by some authority outside the prosecutor's own office. Particularly striking is how one judge pointed out the absurdity of a defendant trying to hold a prosecutor accountable to the bar since: "It flies in the face of reason to expect a defendant to risk a prosecutor's actual or imagined displeasure by instituting proceedings that cannot directly benefit him. The defendant may not unreasonably believe such action will adversely affect his case in subsequent proceedings...or his later chances for parole."

Also, when mistakes are discovered judges rarely hold prosecutors accountable for misconduct; if it is seen as a harmless error rather than misconduct prejudicial to the trial, then the courts can keep the defendant in jail and deny him a reversal of his conviction. Ironically, knowing this, prosecutors are more likely to engage in minor acts of misconduct because they know that even if it is discovered it won't become grounds for a reversal of a conviction. Quite bleakly, the authors claim there are no checks on prosecutorial accountability currently in place.

The history of this problem though goes back much further than *Connick v Thompson*. First, throughout the 1800s, prosecutors were given tort liability immunity by states. This immunity was officially recognized by SCOTUS in 1927. Later, the courts used 42 U.S.C. §1983, which was originally meant to protect citizens' Fourteenth Amendment rights from impingement, in order to give first judges and then prosecutors complete immunity ironically *from* §1983 suits. *Imbler v Pachtman*, the 1976 case that extended this immunity to prosecutors, was startlingly similar to Thompson's case. Imbler was convicted of murder but was able to get a hold of exculpatory evidence and sought a suit against Pachtman, the prosecutor, who withheld the evidence. SCOTUS sided with Pachtman and thus affirmed prosecutorial immunity from §1983 suits. Now, *Connick v Thompson* denies the possibility of even holding a prosecutor accountable as a municipal employee who failed to properly train his office. As I stated earlier, Justice Thomas did state that a prosecutor could be held accountable if a pattern of *similar* misconduct can be discovered, but as we see with Thompson's case, even finding a single exculpatory microfiche takes years and a great deal of luck. The possibility of finding evidence of

multiple Brady violations coming from the same prosecutorial office is like slim to none, since most of these suits by exonerated men are occurring years after the original criminal trial.

Shockingly, the authors claim there is in the history of the United States only *one* instance of a former prosecutor being taken to court to be held *criminally* liable for a Brady violation, and that was in the well publicized 1999 trial of the DuPage Seven, who framed an innocent man and also perjured themselves in a capital murder case. And in that case even the seven men were all acquitted. Acts of misconduct are seen as “technical errors” that need not be criminalized as prosecutors already have “demanding and stressful jobs,” and in order to prove criminal misconduct one must show it was willful which is extremely difficult (Keenan 218). In the Thompson criminal case only one prosecutor received any punishment from the board for his actions and even this was overturned by the Supreme Court of Louisiana, which said he was negligent, but not in error.

I would like to go back over an analogy made previously. A man shoots a human being outside the context of a capitalist institution and is forever a murderer and a felon, and once he goes to jail we are more *certain* than ever that he is a murderer. Yet within the capitalist organized criminal justice system, when a lawyer sends an innocent man to death, he merely made a single mistake that does not reflect the training required to hold down his job. In fact we are *certain* that his job makes him unassailable to accusations because he is a lawyer after all. We *know* he must have been trained properly, and we are thus *certain* any mistake made within his office was merely a mistake. We know the prosecutor is innocent and the innocent man is guilty. Perhaps capitalism has driven us all a bit insane. Looking at the state of prosecutorial immunity in America today it is hard not to see a vigilante. District Attorney’s offices are organized with no oversight. Individual prosecutors can file charges purely as they see fit. It is like the Courts from Kafka’s *The Trial*: it is a bureaucracy built on the personal prejudices and whims of men high in an inaccessible bureaucracy hierarchy who are immune from justice themselves only because they seem not to be physically contiguous with it. So, too, are prosecutors both the orchestrators of an abstract bureaucracy turned into concrete nightmare who themselves are immune from the hand of justice because they are disconnected from it when it suits them (i.e.: when convicting people they are a part of a vicious, physical ‘justice’-system, but when they themselves are accused, they are distant from justice and are instead merely stressed, over-worked technical bureaucrats). As they rain down punishment on people they are a force of vigilante justice, but when the lens of justice is turned back upon them they appear as mild mannered technocrats incapable of prejudice and can at best only be blamed for miscalculations and technical errors. They cannot be held accountable for violating people’s rights except in their capacity as municipal employee, but even then their ability to afford law school means they come with ethics included right out the box. The worst thing that could happen to them is a conviction could be overturned and that is unlikely even if misconduct occurs.

Vigilantism pervades the prosecutor’s office as an extension of the vigilantism that I will show operates in the origin of policing. Though we have tried to crack down on police misconduct because it is often times such a physical, forceful violation of rights, prosecutors are free to grind innocent men to dust in the gears of bureaucratic judicial system. They do not wield guns but only subpoenas and motions. The origin of policing has displaced somewhat from the physical force to the bureaucratic.

In Bryan Wagner’s “The Strange Career of Bras-Coupé” he takes a look at the history of police in America. Within Wagner’s work I believe we see the true roots of policing as paradoxically coming from vigilantism rather than a true adherence to the law they claim to uphold. Wagner points out that the institution of law enforcement’s history is often told in terms of “modern law enforcement... in Boston and New York when southern cities used fully equipped police patrols long before they appeared in the northeast” (59). In New Orleans, these police started as slave patrols as they did in many cities in the United States, which carried a state police power that included a “monopoly on legitimate violence” (Wagner 65). This idea of the police as the sole author of violence stems from the belief that “political society begins when individuals transfer their claim

on personal violence to a sovereign with a near-exclusive right to the initiation of force” (65). Wagner points out that reformers of the era believed that police forces are a vestige of the anarchic past that should not be necessary in an era of modernity where a stable state does not require violence to create adherence to a law. Reformers saw police authority over violence as “the abrogation, rather than the foundation, of the rule of law” (Wagner 65). The reformers pointed out that the decision of a police officer to use violence was “discretion and hence could not be regulated by legal norms” and thus it was not an enactment of the law but “a threat to law” (65). These reformers believed once the police are no longer needed “history reaches its endpoint” and an ideal state is born (Wagner 65). The reformers seem to want to hopefully suggest that law is not founded upon the threat of violence.

But let us eliminate our faith in a pure law, which has a real teleology that leads to a utopia (since they seem to suggest there is no flaw in law inherently but that the “foul stain” of police violence is imposed on it) (Wagner 65). Let us see what happens when *both* that law is founded upon the threat of violence (as the proponents of police suggest) *and* the discretion over the act of violence by the police constitutes a fundamental break with law (as the reformers suggest). Taken to its logical conclusion we will see a frustrating paradox where I believe we will find some answers to our questions about the nature of not just policing, but also the whole of the US criminal justice system. If the threat of police violence is the foundation of the rule of law, then the discretion to actually use that violence implies an action of stepping outside the law and thus a movement toward vigilantism. Yet vigilantism itself is predicated on the existence of the law, since there has to be an ‘inside’ of the official legal procedure in order for one to step to the ‘outside’ to be a vigilante. In order to actualize the potential threat upon which law is based, the police must step outside the law. Since it is the foundation of the rule of law, this ‘outside’ isn’t really outside at all, but in fact is necessary for the stability of the state from within. This paradox is supported in America where the slave patrols organized under a kind of “state encouraged vigilantism” (Wagner 58). ‘State encouraged vigilantism’ should be an oxymoron, and its reality is disturbingly real and revealing.

Vigilantism is clearly the root and originary character of policing, and it is clearly not based on evaluating lawful or unlawful behavior, but on *prejudice*. Not exclusively racial prejudice but literally any personal, social, economic, racial, or class pre-judgment that the individual policing has about the one being policed. Right about now you should be thinking, “this is all very interesting but vigilantism presupposes that there is already an official law enforcement agency from which to step out of in order to be a vigilante, so how can vigilantism be the origin of the very thing to which it is an alternative to?”

Vigilantism is not to be defined as an alternative to an existent lawful police force, but as law exceeding its limit in order for it to define that limit for its subjects. Thus it takes control of the ‘outside’ in order to ensure its subjects remain ‘inside’. Covering up this truth and making it appear as if vigilantism is an exception and rare alternative to a normally healthy police force is the work of the victor’s account of history. It is nothing other than the state’s ability to gloss over its vigilantism and claim it as unintended exceptions to a lawful rule rather than as foundations to the law. Cleverly the state displaces its origin into a place of anomaly and exception so that vigilantism’s existence within police forces appears incidental and contingent rather than necessary and originary. They write history of vigilantism as an anomaly that momentarily ruptures an otherwise self-contained and self-sufficient system.

Jamaica Kincaid’s “On Seeing England for the First Time” can help us probe further into this issue of historical account. Kincaid stresses that difference between her and the English is not England’s power of objective law but their power to take “prejudices” of “personal opinion” and use power and violence to implement their prejudice “on a grand scale” of global colonialism (Kincaid 911). Colonial law is put in place and enforced not within the bounds of that law itself but by prejudice. Yet the way the English relate their history elides all of this and makes the violence seem exceptional. Unlawful cruelty and violence are a thing of England’s feudal

past that is only in books now, and when she visits England they portray themselves as educated, civilized, and modern. The act of reciting the history of the victor is necessarily a teleology that makes vigilantism and wanton violence seem mere hiccups on a path to modernity that was filled with ‘good’ things like legal strictures, social contracts, sovereigns, legitimate authority, the body politic, and representative government. In reality none of these teleological goals could have been attained *without* the brutality and vigilantism to enforce the law from outside the law. Legality seems prior to vigilantism, whose existence is made to seem unfortunate but completely incidental (and certainly not something for which they should be blamed!).

We see this same account of vigilantism within prosecutorial offices. They can commit heinously criminal acts, but when a mistake is found, they become overworked attorneys who had a mildly negligent technical error. They write the history of the judicial system. Like Kincaid’s England, they engage in vigilante misconduct to exert power and control but portray themselves as mild mannered city folk who occasionally, by accident of course, cause injustice. Yet it is never legal but always prejudicial. This bleeds into the history that is written by the judicial system. A criminal is branded a criminal. As Michelle Alexander points out the status of felon and the stigma with having been to jail is a new form of Jim Crow that allows for new covert modes of racial segregation. It is all part of the bureaucratic vigilantism of the prosecutor’s office. Meanwhile, prosecutors have no repercussion for their steps ‘outside’ the law. In fact, they are even offered a free pass by prosecutorial immunity. As long as the history of the judicial system and the prison industrial complex is written by the police and the prosecutors, then the vigilantism at the heart of arrests and convictions will always be cast as the exception to an otherwise perfect system.

A good example of the overwriting of the true historical genealogy of vigilantism in law is an article in the *California Law Review* called “Judicially Initiated Prosecution: A Means of Preventing Continuing Victimization in the Event of Prosecutorial Inaction.” It criticizes prosecutors for not taking enough cases to trial and thus not convicting enough criminals. It actually proposes that vigilantism is a product of prosecutorial inaction and argues that vigilantes are most commonly frustrated victims. It displaces the history of vigilantism unto victims (I am not attacking victims here, but it is a fact that vigilantism and lynching history in America is most assuredly not based on frustrated victims who never got to see their victimizer receive justice). Thus vigilantism seems not even just an exception in the system, but actually suggests that vigilantism is a product of prosecutors not convicting enough. Vigilantism can now be wielded as a whip encouraging prosecutors to prosecute more, criminalize more, convict more, jail more. The vigilantism that founds prosecutorial law is displaced by the victor’s history onto victims and in turn becomes added incentive for the continuation of the prejudicial and excessive prosecutorial practices that have led to such gross misconduct throughout the country. The article does not even bring up the possibility that the absolute determination (that the article champions) of the prosecutor to get a conviction in a case would become itself a form of vigilante justice.

Slave patrols have become district attorney’s offices scouring the land to mark those who catch its prejudicial eye as ‘criminals’ and ‘felons’ in a system that leaves them not savage predators, but innocent little men in suits and glasses with binders bursting with papers. Kafka’s *The Trial* begins with the line, “Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested,” and this is one of the only times that the third person narrative acknowledges the innocence of K. The whole ordeal begins with a personal prejudicial slander of K, yet neither this prejudice nor the slander is ever looked into. It is all he can do to fend himself off from the Court’s bureaucracy. With its immense weight of papers, forms, offices, regulations, by-laws, jails, and officials—the material stuff of the justice system—it erases the ethereal whispers of slander and the unconscious prejudices that initiated the turning of the cogs of bureaucracy and overwrites them with a history that inscribes a judgment into the body of the accused that marks him permanently in our society (like Kafka’s torture machine “In the Penal Colony” which literally writes the crimes with a knife point into the skin of the accused thus proving them guilty in the act of capital punishment itself). Our

'state endorsed vigilantism' has become a 'state as Kafkaesque nightmare' through the terrifying machinations of bureaucracy that seem to take vigilantism into a world of file cabinets and briefcases and office hallways. The history of the American justice system will never truly be known until we are given a new working concept of what justice is, and I believe only then will we be able to see how nightmarish 'justice' was. Reformulating justice is not some utopian undertaking, but an urgent flight away from the dystopia already underway.

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THE COURT ROOM

BY MONTY FORD, FREDERICK DOUGLASS HIGH SCHOOL

On Tuesday, April 15, 2003, I entered a courtroom for my very first time. I did not expect to see a courtroom so small in size. I imagined it would look like the typical television version with a jury. The first person I laid my eyes on was Judge Mark Doherty, a heavysset white male with a tired look in his eyes.

Judge Doherty was everything I expected in a Judge. His great masculine size plus his down to earth look that would kill a mule caught my attention in no time. I walked in unaware of the path before me, between the two rows of chairs, and the people's shoes I stepped on. I took a seat.

From the corner of my left eye, a bright orange uniform grabbed my attention like sunflower to a honey bee. I looked over, only to see a kid like myself in a prison jump suit. Before I could give his situation any thought, the state attorneys representing the Department of Corrections started asking questions. (Judge Mark Doherty, of section F of Juvenile Court in New Orleans, ordered the hearing. He wanted to take testimony on the issue of whether the state prison at Tallulah is a fit place to send juveniles.) Two attorneys were females and the other two were men.

The attorneys on both sides asked the juvenile all kinds of questions. They asked him if he had sex with the guards, how many fights took place each day, and about his mistreatment. I tried to focus on the juvenile's words, but his slang kept me lagging behind. My thoughts drifted away to another world. My eyes opened and closed for a minute, and then I was asleep.

I opened my eyes and saw a familiar face walk past me. I thought it was a dream because the short figure looked somewhat like my god-brother. The cold courtroom air hit my face and proved to me it wasn't a dream. Our eyes met and smiles grew. Who would have thought in a million years we would meet this way? He sat down to be questioned by the attorneys.

The trial came back to life in a matter of seconds. Sadness rained down on me when I saw the shackles on his feet. For as long as I could remember, we were free as birds that flew around the neighborhood. He now has to serve time for something that was not even worth it. Plus, he is in a messed up system. The old saying came to me, "You do the crime you have to pay the time."

My attention was completely on my god-brother. His testimony was raw and uncut. He said everything that was on his mind.

The State Attorneys started to cross examine him. The first questions that caught my attention were about the East Madison County Correctional Institute counselors. The State Attorney asked my god-brother how many counselors he had. My god-brother said he had four since he been in Tallulah. The State Attorney then asked him why so many. He replied, "Two of my counselors quit, one retired, and the last one just don't be there. So I didn't get a chance to talk the last one, and I know I shouldn't say this, but she is a old bag."

For a moment I laughed at my god-brother. The students sitting next to me were laughing too. We settled down, and then the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana attorneys spoke to him. The main part of his testimony was about a female guard. My god-brother was asked did he get into any fights with the prison guards. He said, "Yes, one time I was taking a shower and a lady guard was in the shower room, but she didn't supposed to be in there. I'm just takin my shower you dig, and she come and smack me in my face. So I spit in her face because she was wrong for that, down bad. She wrote me up, and I wrote her up. She put on the paper that I was beating my meat when I was taking a shower."

Shortly after my godbrother was asked did he tell his counselor. He said, "Yea, but she didn't do nothing. She never be there most of the time."

After all the fuss, he was written up, but they did not write her up.

The next altercation was in the jail yard. My god brother admitted to talking smart to the lady. The action she took upon him was not justified. She was a heavy set woman, and she grabbed him like a kid in a super-market and ran his head to the ground a few times. This was the only altercation he reported.

As time passed, Judge Doherty looked worn out from this hearing. I turned to my right and I saw my god-brother's god-father. I thought how much better my god-brother would be growing up if he had his family around him rather than some childish adults just working a job and messing with and messing over these teens.

I AM NOT AMERICAN

BY NATASHA LEE, ELEANOR MCMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

I am not American. Yes, I was born on American soil. Yes, I am native to this colonized dirt that carries far too many incubus stories. I was raised in an American household where my dad went to work and my mother took care of the household duties. Though I am surrounded by America, I am not American. I partake American life: I attend American school, speak American language, and even eat its food. But I, I am not American.

I am not a part of this devious nation in which we live. A nation that ostracized an entire race. This nation that enslaved humans, forced strenuous labor, and whipped them to the cotton fields. It's funny how Americans think slavery doesn't exist, how America blinds its citizens by light. By light, I mean freedom. The thirteenth amendment clearly states: neither slavery nor involuntary servitude is legal "except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." It's naïve of Americans to think that slavery would cease when we learned a long time ago that nothing is created or destroyed, it is merely transformed. We live in a country where prison is equivalent to slavery. This country has the world's highest prison rate. No, slavery has not been destroyed, nor abolished. It is simply the newest strand of AIDS: constantly changing. I am not American; I am not an oblivious citizen to your oppressive nation.

So if you claim you're American, stop and think about the fucked up, prejudiced, scandalous nation in which you so easily stand and pledge your allegiance. When I say you, I mean you ignorant, unaware, *laissez faire* Americans. Stop and think about your noble nation that bombed two large Japanese cities filled with moms, dads, grandpaws, grandmaws. You seem to forget—forget about the massacre of damn near an entire race of

natives. It is your well-rounded nation that lies, cheats, and steals from you, you unknowledgeable, inattentive, gullible Americans.

This is American, and I am not American. I do not identify with the American race. I say race in references to species: those American-like characteristics. I live in this corrupted nation as a citizen solely under the jurisdiction of America. I am not American.

UNTITLED

BY NATASHA LEE, ELEANOR McMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Many people grow up in one-parent homes or without either of their parents. Parents become absent in the lives of children for many reasons, some of which are too complicated for a young child to understand.

Parents who go to prison do not suffer the consequences alone. The children of incarcerated parents often lose contact with their parent, and visits are often rare. This absence leaves a child vulnerable, and he or she may handle it in many different ways. The child may undergo behavioral consequences such as emotional withdrawal, failure in school, delinquency, and risk of incarceration. Because officials do not ask at the time of arrest whether their prisoners have children, these children end up missing or roaming from one caretaker to another. "Since no agency collects data about these children, it is unclear how many are affected, who they are, or where they live," said Charlene Wear Simmons in her "Children of Incarcerated Parents" study.

My mother was not in and out of jail all my life, but she was always in and out of my life. From as early as I can remember, my biological mother has never positively affected or influenced me. If she taught me anything at all, it is how to be the complete opposite of her. In that regard, she taught me how to act like a lady, respect myself, and never turn my back on family. According to "Effects of Abandonment in Children" by Jennifer Wolf, "Children who have been abandoned may reject everything about the absent parent: In some cases, children who have been abandoned by one parent will make an effort to completely reject him or her. You'll see this when a child expresses the desire to be the exact opposite of the absent parent." These effects of incarceration vary from individual to individual. Some children begin to hate their parent for his or her absence, while others only try to build stronger bonds.

I sit in English class and listen to my peers read about their abandonment experiences and the imprisonment of their loved ones. Jade's story impacts me the most. She talks about how her brother has mental problems and how he has to take medicine to stay sane. When she describes the bond she and her brother share, I wonder why it is so different from my biological mother. Jade says she knows that her brother has committed crimes, but she still loves him unconditionally. I often get lost in my thoughts and find myself questioning why she cares so much for somebody who has done so much wrong. I wonder why I cannot forgive my mother.

The absence of parents affects each child differently. Take Alia, for example. Her father has never really been a part of her life, but she still wants him to have a relationship with her. She feels that there is always time to change and make up for the time that was lost. Kaleb, in contrast, expresses that he can care less about his father's absence in his life. Kaleb believes that he grew up just fine without his father.

In "6 Lessons I Learned About Being a Man from Growing Up Fatherless," Brett & Kate McKay say: "The statistics about single-parent households make you believe that every boy who grows up with one parent ends up on drugs, unsuccessful, and in prison, but that's simply not true. Because of growing up fatherless, I have stayed away from destructive activity and crime and have instead moved into being a successful entrepreneur and towards a mission of changing millions of lives in a positive way." While it is true that many people are negatively affected by not having a father figure, this article shows that many others persevere.

I'm not particularly attached to my biological mother because I was adopted at the age of one by my aunt—whom I refer to as my mom. I call her Mom because that's the role she has played my entire life. She never treated me like a step-child, and she has always cared about my safety and well-being.

I think I would accept my mother better if she had been incarcerated. Knowing that she willingly abandoned me for her own selfish gain sometimes makes me feel like the sperm cell that got away.

My sister feels greater hatred and resentment than I do. I asked her why she hates our biological mother so much. She said, "The day I came home from the hospital was the day she walked out of my life. Since then I saw her, what seemed like, every other year. I never received a 'Happy Birthday', a dollar, a pat on the back, or even an 'it's going to be okay sweetheart' from her. In fact, she always told me how children ruined her life."

Children who have been abandoned may idealize the absent parent: Some children may over-identify with the absent parent and develop a set of fantasies about him or her which—although they may provide temporary comfort—are not based in reality. These adversities may shape us but they do not define us, therefore allowing people to handle things in their own ways.

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TALKING ON THE JAIL PHONE

BY BRANDY BROWN, ELEANOR MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

It's 9:00, and we're getting ready to go. My two brothers and I sit apart on the matching sofa, love seat and chair. My feet don't touch the floor, and I swing them back and forth as we wait for my grandmother to grab her purse. Grandma says we're going to see mama. I don't understand how that's possible, but we are leaving.

Just as we are about to walk out the door, the phone rings. I don't know who it is, but I know they are asking my grandmother where she's going.

"I'm taking Brandy, Brian, and Brandon to see they sorry ass mama," she answers. "That bitch keep asking me to bring 'em up there. I don't know why she want them to see her like that."

In the van, I look out the window as I always do. The house disappears, and I see nothing but big buildings. We stop. I automatically feel uncomfortable. The building is tall and looms like trees in a graveyard. It's gray with big, black iron bars on all the windows.

The person at the desk looks up as we walk in. I also notice a guard with a gun, not really guarding anything.

"May I help you?" asks the lady at the desk.

"We're here to see Brenda Brown," admits my grandmother.

The lady calls someone, and then the guard brings us through a door. The room is divided by Plexiglas with marble tables and phones on a mini marble wall connected to the Plexiglas. My grandma sits in the chair, and

we stand about her. My mother comes out with shackles on her feet. For a long time after this, the shackles make me question why she keeps going back. Her hands are free to talk on the phone.

My mother is wearing a blue jumpsuit. Her hair is in a bush. She looks healthier than she did 16 months before. The drugs can't get her in here. She sits down and picks up the phone. My grandmother talks first. My mother doesn't really like her, so all she asks is about money and supplies.

My grandmother gives me the phone, and my mother asks me a series of unimportant questions.

"Have you been listening to your grandma?"

"Yeah."

"Are you doing good in school?"

"Um-huh."

Holding the phone to my ear, I ask, "When you coming home?"

"In a little while, Brandy." She doesn't have a real answer.

She looks at me with tears in her eyes and puts her hand against the Plexiglas. I put my hand to where hers is. Today it reminds me of one of those corny Lifetime Movie Channel movies.

INCARCERATION

BY CANDACE WHEELER, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

Graduation is rapidly approaching, and I for one am extremely excited. For the first time I will be able to have my whole family with me at an event. Never can I remember a time when my three brothers, my sister and I ever spent time together. This time is different though, because my oldest brother Steven is getting out of jail and my older brother Melvin promised me that he would stay out of trouble because he wasn't trying to go back to jail anyway.

For as long as I can remember my two oldest brothers have always spent time in jail. At least since I have been born I mostly remember my parents telling me they were in jail. I never took pleasure in telling people that, but I came to the conclusion that it is what it is, and at the end of the day they are my brothers and I love them dearly. Graduation day is supposed to be different though. Everything is supposed to be perfect with my brothers there to celebrate with me.

Melvin just came out of jail in January, and Steven goes to trial toward the end of January. He is confident that he is getting out and refused the plea bargain. There is proof and documentation from doctors to prove his innocence of the rape of the four-year-old girl back in 2007. Steven is incarcerated in Jefferson Parish, and is on twenty-three hour lockdown every day.

Well, to make a long story short he went to trial and had his own cousin to testify against him. He decided to take the plea bargain of fifteen years because he was scared that he would be given fifty years if he didn't. Steven said that the little girl entered the courtroom dressed in all white. He said that if he was the judge, he would've convicted himself from the appearance of the girl alone. Plus to make bad matters worse he didn't have a real lawyer.

The second chapter of *The New Jim Crow* opened my understandings of why he took the time, since he was innocent of the crime. Michelle Alexander writes, "Full-blown trials of guilt or innocence rarely occur; many

people never even meet with an attorney; witnesses are routinely paid and coerced by the government.” This shows to me that the government can put whomever it wants behind bars because money talks. I don’t know about too many other places, but I do know that in New Orleans young African American males are incarcerated so much that I can say that they are endangered by the government. On www.aclu.com I read, “In April 2006, the ACLU of Louisiana filed a state Public Records Act request with the NOPD seeking information on racial profiling and police misconduct, and urged systemic reforms of the department. Institutional racism and the targeting of African-Americans by the NOPD have resulted in the over-incarceration of African-Americans in Orleans Parish Prison.” The thing that made the ACLU look into it is that blacks have been having hard times in New Orleans with the NOPD. “Based on complaints we receive, we believe that police violence and unwarranted stops disproportionately affect people of color,” said Schwartzman. “It’s time to take a look at whether the NOPD is conducting the trainings required by its profiling policy. We also need to look at the volume of complaints from citizens, and the ultimate disposition of those complaints. This is not a new problem. This is not a Katrina problem. The Department must take steps to reprimand any improper behavior in this incident, and it must also take steps toward systemic reform.”

It seems like the ACLU wasn’t able to change much because police are still harassing our young African-American males. I know this because my brother Joseph fits the typical stereotype. He’s black with dreads and wears baggy pants with long white T-shirts. He is constantly pulled over by the police, sometimes even while he is walking down his own street. At times I feel like the NOPD has nothing to do. This is a sad conclusion to come up with—because the police have almost nothing to do, families grieve for loved ones who are no longer a phone call away.

I interviewed two high school kids who are also graduating this year and have incarcerated family members who would have loved to see them walk across the stage. I only asked two simple questions and was shocked at the answers I received. I asked person one what was his relation to the person in jail, and person one responded “my father.” My next question was what was he in jail for? “He received 10 years for possession of cocaine. I know he was wrong, but still they could’ve put him in a drug abuse program or something. They have real people who commit murders just because they feel like it, but my daddy gets ten years for possession.” Person two said that an aunt is in jail, and ended the second question by only stating that the aunt killed her child in the bath tub. Then person two walked away.

I can only imagine what will be going through their minds graduation day because I know I am not really looking forward to it. My first real family function with my three brothers and my sister is now destroyed since two of my brothers are now again behind prison doors.

DEAR GRANDMA

BY TAREIAN KING, ELEANOR McMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

“Ten people, including a physician and registered nurse, are charged in Baton Rouge for allegedly filing \$24 million in false claims against Medicare, Justice Department officials announced Wednesday in Washington, D.C.”

—Bill Lodge, *Advocate* staff writer

7-31-12

Grandma,

Happy Birthday. I would have never thought you would be spending your sixtieth birthday in witness protection. Everything happened so fast. One day I came to see you and there was a lady living with you. It wasn't anything new, because you would take in anybody. You told me she was a doctor, a cancer specialist. When she moved in, the house had medicine and papers everywhere. She got you a job in marketing. According to businessdictionary.com, a marketer is a person whose duties include the identification of the goods and services desired by a set of consumers, as well as the marketing of those goods and services on behalf of a company. You delivered Ensure and wheelchairs to people and signed them up for home health care. That's all I knew. I knew that you got paid a lot of money for doing it, but I did not know that the money that was changing your world was called kickbacks. Dictionary.com states a kickback is a percentage of income given to a person in a position of power or influence as payment for having made the income possible; usually considered improper or unethical. I didn't know about all of this.

You were a rising star. At first you were talking about getting a house built in Laplace. My question was always what made you want a house in Laplace. You were entitled to government assistance for housing for the rest of your life. I don't like that so many of us are dependents of the government, and if you could get off government aid, you should. But grandma, you were in your late fifties talking about getting a house built, and all I could think about was debt. Well, we both know playing cards put you in debt, but that was different. Playing cards was not a big debt like getting a house would be. I'd take your playing cards as an occupation any day now. I appreciate falling asleep on the card game players' sofas and having to stay at people's houses until one or two o'clock in the morning. When you paid that contractor thousands of dollars to start building the new house and he didn't, I thought it was a sign. When you found out he had plenty of lawsuits against him and you couldn't get your money back, I thought it was a sign. You didn't have any credit, so it made it difficult for you to get the house. Grandma, to be honest, I didn't like the freedom the money was allowing you to have. That job made a way for you to get a house miles away from me and your family. When the doctor went to federal prison, I still didn't think anything was wrong, but I realized that you were working hard to make ends meet to pay for the house. The house note was expensive, much more than your decreased income could afford. I had to watch you ride around in that hot truck, and sometimes ride with you for you to work. I constantly tried to figure out what was going on that was changing your life at such a fast pace. I decided to look into the doctor's history.

“Baton Rouge-Area Fraud Scheme Bills Medicare Nearly \$800 Thousand for Unnecessary Equipment”: A New Orleans doctor, Dahlia V. Kirkpatrick, and Emmanuel M. Komandu, the owner of a Baker, LA medical equipment company, pleaded guilty on October 4, 2010, to filing fraudulent Medicare claims of over \$775,000, from which they received over \$302,000 from January 2005 to February 2010. The company, Alpha Medical Solutions, Inc., used prescriptions written by Kirkpatrick to bill Medicare for medically unnecessary equipment, such as power wheelchairs, wheelchair accessories, and feeding nutrients. Kirkpatrick and Komandu were sentenced to 30 and 48 months in prison, respectively, on January 6, 2011.

According to court documents, from approximately January 2005 through February 2010, Komandu and Kirkpatrick submitted and caused the submission, on behalf of Alpha, of approximately \$775,019 in fraudulent claims to the Medicare program. The majority of Alpha's fraudulent claims were based on prescriptions for medically unnecessary DME that were written and provided by Kirkpatrick. Kirkpatrick wrote prescriptions for medically unnecessary DME, such as power wheelchairs, wheelchair accessories, and feeding nutrients. Medicare paid \$302,811 to Alpha based on these fraudulent claims.

—Federal Bureau of Investigation, New Orleans Division

I'm learning as I write. You were transporting the goods. I don't think you knew that they were doing illegal stuff. I remember you telling me that the doctor liked to help black people. She would give Ensure to the patients that were small and wanted to give all of her patients wheelchairs. I don't know what to believe about her, or if I really care. All I know is that we were doing well before you got that job. I despise that job. It brought us down. Dr. Kirkpatrick could have kept her job, and you could have moved to a better house that accepted the government money. I wondered why you didn't just let the house in Laplace go. It was making you struggle and stress by you not having as much of an income. Pride—you struggled and busted your butt for your pride. I hope this whole experience has taught you to throw your pride to the side. Why did you want a house anyway? I thought it was because all your friends owned their homes or were buying houses. Am I wrong? Where are those friends now? Do you see them in witness protection? Do you see them isolated from their families? No grandma, you don't. I'm not trying to get smart, but you caring about what people thought helped them take you away from me. I look at money totally differently now. I wouldn't mind living in a hut in Africa. As long as I have my freedom, my mind, and peace I will be okay. I always wanted to practice criminal justice, but at one point of time I let the love of the idea of having money influence me to start looking at corporate law. I let the love of the idea of having money push my passion of helping people to the side. If you didn't take that job, you wouldn't have had the money, but you would have freedom, and peace of mind. I'm not trying to throw your mistakes in your face; I just hope you are learning.

I never took the time out to research what was happening. You would get out of bed to go whisper on the phone and started sleeping on the sofa. You started losing weight. You kept it from me for a long time at first. I knew something was going on, and that it was not anything good, but deep inside I didn't want to know. I knew you were in the newspapers and I could Google you, but I guess I just didn't want to know. I didn't want to face the reality of what was happening to you. You didn't directly tell me that you could be going to prison. I listened to the conversations you had on the phone with your friends and just put the pieces together. The court dates came, and I still didn't know what was happening. It seemed like you still were trying to keep something from me.

You remember the day I had to drive you around, since somebody had stolen your car? That was the day that I learned of what was fully going on. They had you in their hands, and I hated it.

On the day of your party, I had a lot on my mind. You were turning sixty, humans die. I was going away to college in New York, and I didn't have the chance to spend time with you because I always had meetings, and you could be facing time in prison. As lazy as you say I am, that day I cleaned my butt off for you. I cleaned the bathrooms and your room! And I mopped and swept and vacuumed and made up your bed! Even though you always say I don't know how to make up a bed. Grandma, I even wiped the baseboards! You're probably shocked that I even know the word. I was working hard for you. And you saw it and acknowledged it and that made me happy. We talked about how my momma was getting on our nerves when she would go outside. We shared a cold drink like we always did. I walked around in my panties. I was comfortable. I was with my grandma who meant the world to me. I was thinking to myself 'I love that lady. I would die for her.'

In the middle of me cleaning you got a phone call that would change both of our lives even more than we ever imagined. "They killed him. They killed him." I watched your eyes tear up, and I wondered who was killed. Milton. Words can't explain how I felt at that moment. Milton was the guy who was doing the same thing you did. Somebody had put a hit out on him. My heart was full again. Now I had to worry about somebody possibly trying to hurt you. You started saying that the Lord took your truck away from you for a reason. When I found out somebody stole your truck, it was another burden on me. I didn't like that you didn't have a car, because you didn't like that you didn't have a car.

At the time, I wanted braids. You told me that the mother of the guy who stole your car did braids and that you would get her number. You hated my hair. Your beautiful chocolate granddaughter had cut all of her permed hair off, and you hated it. I couldn't do anything but laugh when you said, "You used to be a pretty chocolate girl," and I told you my black was beautiful and that I no longer wanted to look like the people who oppressed me. Now that I think about it, they were the same people who were oppressing you. I let the lady do my braids. I wanted to see the lady's son. I wanted to see how he looked and give him a piece of my mind, but his mother said she was done with him and that he couldn't come. You didn't have any hard feelings to either of them. You are so loving, and caring! When I told my friends about it, they laughed, but they knew that is just who you are. Grandma, you always said "You can't knock anybody from making a dollar," and you surely meant it, huh? I didn't see any good in your truck being stolen, and you didn't either. When you found out that the person who killed Milton had rolled up on him while he was in his car and shot him, you were happy you didn't own any wheels anymore, and I was too.

Your head was gone after that phone call. You started looking for your lawyer's number, but it couldn't be found. He ended up calling you to tell you the news anyway. He said that they would have to send FBI agents to the party to protect you. I didn't like the whole situation, but I couldn't do anything. While my momma and I were in Wal-Mart, your lawyer called her phone and said he needed to talk to you. My momma called him on three way. When I heard the lawyers say that you shouldn't have your party and that they needed to come pick you up, I got emotional. It was real, but I still was trying not to face the reality. I wanted to stay and enjoy your birthday party, but grandma, you are my everything—how could I smile and be friendly and party when they were taking you away from me?! How could I party when I knew my 60-year-old grandma had to go in the hands of federal agent killers, still could be facing time in prison, and could possibly have people out to kill her? I was moving to New York in a couple of days and would be separated from you anyways, and now there was the possibility that I could never see you again or talk to you if anything happened. It was not a time to rejoice and be happy for me, even if it was my last moment with you.

You were able to have your party, but I left and walked around the neighborhood just crying. I walked in a circle and made it to the side walk that intersected your street. I saw two cars parked close together with the lights on. Men were in the vehicles. It was the FBI. It hurt. Facing the reality I ran away from for so long hurt. When they pulled away, I got up from the curb. They stopped in front of your house and turned on their emergency lights. I broke down. People told me it was going to be okay. Somebody said, "you research the system, so you should know, they protecting her for her own good." That last comment got under my skin. You trusted the feds. You thought that everything was going to be okay. You thought they cared about you. You thought they would save you. You all trusted this system that I hated. It was obvious that they didn't understand the full situation, and you just didn't know how the system works. Let me backtrack and refer to what the system said about the situation:

"The defendants charged in this takedown are accused of stealing precious taxpayer resources and defrauding Medicare — jeopardizing the integrity of our health care system and our nation's most critical health care program for personal gain," U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder says in a news release.

Assistant Attorney General Lanny Breuer said the alleged scammers "treated the Medicare program like personal piggy banks."

You were one of the people they were talking about. The same people who worked for the government that you had helped healthcare centers steal money from were in front of your door coming to "protect" you. They all worked for the same system. Yes, they took you to protect you from being killed by whoever killed the other man that was helping them. But who's going to protect you from them?

“Also charged with one or more conspiracy counts are New Orleans residents Ayanna A. Alvarez, 38; Louis T. Age, 62; Verna S. Age, 58; Milton L. Womack, 59; and Mary L. Johnson, 59.

“Womack and Johnson are alleged to have accepted kickbacks in return for referring patients to the firm. Womack and Johnson allegedly referred patients to the company in exchange for bribe money.”

You are my everything. My heart. My backbone. My grandma. I had to watch you fall. Your going into witness protection meant a lot more to me than it did to everybody else. I had to face reality. I didn't forget what got you in the situation. I didn't forget about all of the stuff I had learned about the FBI and the CIA. When the FBI came to pick you up, I couldn't escape the reality. There was nothing I could tell myself to make me feel better. I'm ready for all of this to be over, and it's just the beginning. You still have a court date. You can go from being in witness protection to being in jail.

“Conspiracy to commit health care fraud carries penalties of up to 10 years in prison and fines of up to \$250,000.”

So once again, the criminal justice system strikes against me by taking away the person who has always showed me unconditional love. First my biological father, then my new dad, then me, now you, in addition to them incarcerating my community. My feelings towards this criminal injustice system are nothing nice, grandma. I can't save you from them, grandma, and that hurts. There's nothing I can do about this situation but wait. I can't save you, but I can try to save the people in our community from the system.

When I found out I got a full scholarship to Bard College in New York, I was overjoyed. All of my hard work had paid off. As the time got closer to me leaving, I didn't want to leave you. I didn't want to come back home to you being sick or gone. That's all I could think about. I ignored the legal matters in your life. Whatever happens, just know I love you, and you will always be my everything. I hate that you had to fall victim to this society. I kept trying to figure out how did it happen to you? How could somebody possibly want to kill you before they tried to kill my dad who was active in the streets of New Orleans? How could my loving, caring grandma possibly face up to ten years in prison? I never imagined you serving time or me having to say “my grandma in prison.” It's even harder on me that I can't do anything about your case, but I will be successful in preventing my people falling victim to the same criminal justice system. I will be one of the many people who make a change in their community. Money can't influence me, and from here on out I would hope it doesn't influence you either. There's nothing you can tell me that is going to ease my mind. If you wrote me and told me they said you were coming home tomorrow, I wouldn't trust it, and you shouldn't either.

On your 60th birthday, I give you these wise words: don't trust the system. Don't trust the system that incarcerates people and separates them from their families. Don't trust the system that works to keep our people down. It is not our friend. I don't care if you don't take in anything I said thus far, just understand that your granddaughter doesn't want you to trust them. If they tell you you're not going to get time, expect to serve ten years. If they sentence you for ten years, be ready to serve ten more. I don't want anything to shock you or mentally destroy you. You get ready for them Grandma, and once again, happy birthday. They can take you away from me physically, but you'll always be in my heart and in my spirit. I love you.

Always and forever,

your stanka

IS JAIL MY DESTINY?

BY BRUCE JAMES COLEMAN, FREDERICK DOUGLASS HIGH SCHOOL

Is jail my destiny? I wonder, do a lot of African Americans actually think that growing up? When I was a teenager in the 1990s, going to jail seemed like the only thing I was accomplishing. I mean, I would have been going to jail as a little kid in elementary school, if there was actually a jail for children. It's funny because I actually think there should be a jail for children because they are getting worse by the decade. I started off as a rebellious child, so jail was in my destiny as a teenager. According to a Justice Department report released in July 2003, the United States prison population surpassed 2 million for the first time that year. The U.S. Prison population is the world's largest. Back in 2003, just three years after I graduated from high school, about 10.4 percent of the entire African American male population in the United States aged 25 to 29 was incarcerated, and only 1.2 percent of white men in that same age group were incarcerated. More African American men were in jail than in college, there were 791,600 men in prison and 603,032 enrolled in college compared to 143,000 black men in prison and 463,700 enrolled in college in 1980. In a sarcastic way, I first looked at those statistics and said, well at least there are more blacks in college. However, even though the amount of college students increased, the prison rate has increased too. So, yes, jail *was* my destiny, at least in my youthful days when I was using crime as a way to have fun and excitement in my life.

Every crime I committed, from being drunk in public, to trespassing, possessing marijuana, disturbing the peace, and other minor misdemeanors, I was guilty for every charge. In jail I realized I was paying the price for my crimes. I deserved to be there, but I knew I didn't like being in jail. Throughout my time in and out, of jail I met, read stories, and even saw on the news people who said they are innocent of their crimes.

I recently read an eleven-page letter titled "From the River to the Lake" from an African American male in Angola named Jerome Morgan. His article talks about how he was framed for a crime he didn't commit, which was murder. I felt sad for Morgan because, unlike him, I went to jail for crimes I willingly and knowingly committed. I was suffering the price, being in jail trapped behind three walls and bars, where the chance of seeing a beautiful woman was rare. I would be hoping one of the guards is a woman. Just to see a woman's face while locked in jail was a breath of fresh air. Taking a shower wasn't even private. The inmates can see you butt naked, and that was a strange uncomfortable feeling. Even though I wasn't in a prison like Angola, stories of men losing their manhood haunted me. I used to be scared I would have to fight for it, but Central Lockup isn't anything like serving a twenty-five to life sentence in Angola. At best the longest I've ever been in jail was ten days, and that's only because I didn't call my parents to bail me out. I was so tired of going to jail and getting my parents to bail me out that I was willing to serve my time and eat the not-so-delicious meals to keep from starving. In my short time in prison I never felt like a slave; I felt more like a soul stripped from reality, and the only way I can touch reality is with my imagination. Then again, who is to say a slave never felt that way?

I understand the prison life, and so to see someone like Morgan in prison for a crime he didn't commit breaks my heart into a million pieces of glass floating in the universe into the hot sun. I eventually found more men like Morgan who are innocent.

Angola was initially an 18,000 acre slave plantation. I learned that from reading Morgan's first paragraph in his letter. It made me realize how much prison is really a modern slave plantation. Morgan's letter inspired me to write this poem entitled *Poetically I Speak*.

Poetically I Speak

Poetically I speak on the plantation of my frustrations trying to build love in my mind while trapped.

I'm trapped in the past of my Dad not raising me; I'm trapped in the excitement of committing crimes.

From the shackles of my imprisonment, I must raise my heart to be in the freedom of forgiveness.

I must raise my soul to succeed in love instead of succeeding in criminal activity destroying me.

I'm guilty for my crimes, but I see the innocent prosecuted, sentenced to death. Let the innocent escape!

I realize I'm in a corrupt nation that has built its richness off of criminals' crime participation.

In my corruption I was feeling innocent but proven guilty in my heart still trying to build

the foundation of freedom in the universe of my mind and recline to a time when there is no prison.

I see prisoners laboring on the plantation, shackled like a slave in their own mind,

watching the sands of time run out and break into a million pieces, and the sand is blown away

in the wind and the prisoners are forgotten in the time machine of reality, so many souls.

Television is

filled with commercials of freedom disappearing from their hearts and minds, becoming prisoners

in their hearts and minds, but free physically, at least that's what they expect.

I'm guilty for my crimes, but I see the innocent through the bars of misery.

They shall rise as the sun rays' beams and gleam freedom in the universe.

Poetically I speak the reinterpretation of an innocent rejuvenation.

As I read Morgan's eleven-page letter I realized that I am close to his age. I was at Francis T. Nicholls during the time it was changed to Frederick Douglass. Morgan was at Frederick Douglass about four years before the name of the school was changed. He just was three or four years older than me. I also realized that Morgan's situation wasn't something that happened fifty or sixty years ago when the system, so to speak, was so unjust. I realized I was living in some American fantasy where we imagine that things like racism and being falsely accused for a crime are in the past. I mean with technology and advanced science that alone should prove if a person committed the crime, not just the evidence of somebody trying to "cover their asses because the victim's mother was voicing her outrage against the city for not bringing her son's killer to Justice," as Morgan says in his letter. Instead of finding the actual person that was guilty of the crime, they just picked Morgan based on the style of his clothing and his close resemblance to the killer. All the youth in America need to be scared if the police can just pick you out of anywhere with no actual evidence to prove you committed the crime. I wonder, were those people who accused Morgan of this crime Caucasian? Was this racism?

I realize racism is still in existence. For example, I never saw so many people hate on a president who had nothing to do with the economy failing in the first place, and who is picking up the pieces from all the presidents before him. I always thought a black president would mean change, but people still hate people based on the color of their skin. Whether you're the president or you're a seventeen year old wrongfully convicted for murder, racism hurts as a sharp knife mistakenly cutting your finger. However, racism is a whole other story because the truth is you can be any race and be corrupt and falsely accuse someone for a crime. Morgan wasn't the only one innocent of a crime. At least he is blessed to have a chance to see freedom, unlike these eight people I'm about to mention who were executed and later found innocent. Will the system ever admit to its mistakes and find a better way to find out if someone is guilty? Fortunately Morgan won't be put to death before proving his innocence. But in some cases people who were found to be innocent have already been put to death. Cameron Todd Willingham, Ruben Cantu, Larry Griffin, Carlos DeLuna, David Wayne Spence, Jesse Tafero, Thomas Griffin and Meeks Griffin were all innocent of their crimes but were executed long before

their innocence was proved. From hearing Morgan's story I understand that a lot of men are in jail but are innocent of the crime. Those eight men and Morgan are a great example of why the justice system needs to be looked at and revised before another innocent man or woman finds him or herself asking, *is jail my destiny?*

Morgan blames his unjust imprisonment on his upbringing. "A large part of the reason why I was so vulnerable to the sufferings of such an unjust imprisonment was due to my upbringing," says Morgan. When I read that it made me think about my upbringing and how that got me in jail. I had a dad who provided shelter, clothes, and food—the things I needed to survive. However, my dad did not provide love, affection, companionship, attention, and wise advice for my upbringing. I had a positive mom who loved me and would sacrifice everything for me, even though I was disrespectful and rebellious against the household. I wanted attention, and my dad wasn't giving it to me. I wanted a man in my life to be my role model. My mom wasn't enough. I was smart enough to make straight A's in school, but I would act out by cursing out the teachers and getting into arguments with the students. All this rebelliousness led to me getting suspended a lot from school. It was always my mom who got me out of trouble. My dad was too busy gambling, drinking alcohol, and smoking weed, or hanging with his twin brother having a super drug and gambling-filled party. I was a kid. I didn't know all this was going on with my dad until I was about twelve years old, and then all he was doing came to the light. So now I had an understanding of why my dad wasn't there for me. However, I still was getting into trouble because I was madder at my dad for not being there for me. Rather than turn me away from him, my dad's not being there for me, or rather his drinking and smoking, inspired me to be like him. That's what a psychologist would say if he observed me. Or perhaps we are the uneducated psychologists of our own lives, making and creating our philosophies as we experience negativity or positivity in life or go from negative to positive. Eventually, my negativity gave me the ability to be positive. Unlike Morgan, I needed prison to be shocked into waking up.

For some, maybe negativity can turn into your greatest strength. But at the time my dad wanted to gamble and do drugs more than being there and giving his son his attention and love. Eventually I started committing crimes that could land me in jail. I started shoplifting, smoking weed and cigarettes, and getting wilder and crazier with an insane way of thinking. I started going to jail for my crimes. I never did more than 10 days in jail, but just those ten days I was in jail it was like being in a hell—like I was a bird with my wings ripped off and I couldn't fly in the luxuriousness of freedom. Still, my experience in jail is nothing like Morgan's experience in Angola. As a teenager, I heard Angola talking to me as a soul saying *you don't want come to this prison—stay on the path you're on and you shall be mine*. But unlike Morgan I was a real criminal, and I committed my crimes. I wasn't innocent of anything. With the thought of being in Angola after the many stories I heard about prison, especially the one where you lose your manhood, I started to straighten up. I realized I would have to deal with my dad not being there for me in another way because being a criminal is something I didn't want to be, because the truth is, prison is no place for a man, innocent or guilty. Morgan described to me vividly how Angola is slavery all over again, and for me the worst kind of slavery I have been through was the military. Even though the military paid me good, I still felt like a slave. So, I know prison is even worse.

When the day comes when Morgan is released from Angola, I will be thanking God Almighty. Before Angola, Morgan had a good life. He had a better childhood than me. Even though I had my dad with me, financially I didn't get to enjoy places like Disney World, Sea World, Disneyland, Las Vegas and many other places Morgan's foster mom had took him. Morgan had a great upbringing. While I was being a wild bad child, Morgan was winning a school talent show. It hit me hard when I realized Morgan had a better life than I ever dreamed, even though I had a mom and dad while Morgan had to grow up in a foster home. This made me realize how much we take for granted what we have while others don't have and still can excel and live a positive life. I was shoplifting, disrespecting my parents and teachers at school, and was just a plumb dumb rebellious fool who eventually became a criminal in high school. But Morgan is the one doing 20 years in jail and counting. Life can

be an unpleasant death that does not kill you but makes you suffer. I saw this after reading about Morgan's life. Sometimes the person who's the worse, suffers less, and the person that does his best suffers the worst. In comparing our lives, I should be the one doing time in prison. Life is strange and unfair in that way, but Morgan's story made me realize how blessed I was that I didn't wind up doing twenty to life. Morgan is the brother I wanted to be like—excelling in school and having a good life with friends and family.

After I accepted that my dad wasn't the role model of the decade, I started looking up to mom to guide me from my criminal-minded ways. Once I started listening to my mom's advice and wisdom, my destiny for being in jail started to come to an end. In high school I started to face my demons. I got expelled from Frederick A. Douglass in the 10th grade I believe or maybe it was the 11th grade. I got expelled for threatening a teacher I really had a crush on. Her name was Ms. Boyd. I had put my hand up and pretended like I was g'on hit her. I've forgotten the reason I did that, but I was tripping as a teenager. For some reason I saw her as a friend more than a teacher, and I just forgot that I couldn't be loose like that. She challenged me, and she said if you do that again I will suspend you. Me being a dumb teenager, I did it again, and since that was my fourth suspension I was expelled from school. Being expelled was my wakeup call. I was able to come back to Frederick Douglass the next semester, and I vowed to finish school and stop being a fool. I started to grow up, and I was staying out of trouble, no smoking weed, no drinking alcohol. I was focused like a golf player focused on making the winning shot. I realized my dad was the way he was because his dad didn't raise him, so my dad didn't know how to be a dad. I forgave my dad for not being there for me and loved him even more and moved on with my life. School started to become fun again, and I was ready to excel. I was starving to be successful, like success is a Layered Beef and Potato Casserole, and I was ready to get full from it.

I saw an opportunity for success when I become a part of a program called Students at the Center (SAC). The SAC program helped me become a better student because I finally had a chance to enjoy school with the things I liked doing, one of which was poetry at the time. I participated in many poetry contests through the SAC program and won first place a few times. I even got involved in journalism. I was having so much fun in school that getting in trouble and committing crimes was the last thing on my mind.

Programs like SAC are a positive influence on people who, like me, are troublemakers/criminals. Now when I read Morgan's letter where he talks about how he won school talent shows, was involved in Black History projects and annual holidays plays and Easter egg hunts, it makes me think of my wonderful experience with the SAC program. Even though I didn't go to Disneyland with my dad like Morgan went to Disneyland with his foster mom, I can at least say the SAC program was my Disneyland.

Eventually I finished school with a positive image of myself, but I found myself after graduating from high school smoking weed again and drinking alcohol. So I found myself going to jail several times for being drunk in public and trespassing and other misdemeanor charges. I realized I was back in the same pattern I was trying to avoid in high school, so the next best thing I did to get out of the situation was to join the Navy. Here is a poem I wrote called "In the Same Place."

In the Same Place

I escaped the prison walls and bars of my youth from the choices of being a superhero that will fight.

I'm the subject, and prison was my past and present. I must separate, use the backlight.

I felt trapped in the prison of my mind, corrupting my soul to think I'm doing alright.

I scream the rain of pain from the clouds that block my sunlight.

I didn't let wisdom and experience fill me up as Cheeseburger lasagna for my appetite.

I was hungry to do what's right, but the same place seems like my destiny, my birthright.

*I'm driving in the circle of my life, shackled to the same place in my ugly and beautiful city.
I committed a crime and pled guilty for my crimes in the same place in my conscious city.
Movies, television shows are being filmed in my heart about my imprisonment inside the matrix box.
I stack up my freedom as blocks to climb out of my sinfulness mailed off in the postbox.
The matrix box is duplicated in my youth into my maturity, but I still will unplug from foolishness.
I will unplug from unrighteousness, I will unplug from ungodliness and wickedness.
I'm sailing the sea now, still finding myself on the ocean, still in prison in the same place.
In the same place I about-face, wishing I was in anyplace except for the same place.
In the prayers of my frustrations my future has freedom in the past still in prison.
My prison was the sinfulness I enjoyed having; now I take off the prison chains in the same place.*

In high school being a writer saved me, but when I went to the Navy not writing was my biggest mistake. If I could again be in my last two years of high school, I would stay there. I knew I made a mistake when I chose to be a cook instead of being a journalist in the Navy. The cooking job stressed me out, so I went back to drinking alcohol. Eventually, I kept going to Captain's Mess and was doing time in the ship jail. Once again, prison was in my life. Even though I joined the military to keep from going to prison, prison still seemed like my destiny. This story of me going to prison in the Navy is nothing compared to Morgan's situation, but I know how much I hated prison, even though I knew I was guilty for my crimes. Can you picture how Morgan feels and he is in prison for a crime he didn't commit? When Morgan has his freedom, it will be like he's a newborn baby walking into the atmosphere, and the sun in the sky will feel like a long lost friend. That's surely how I felt when I got out of the Navy with a good discharge. I felt like I can start a new journey in life with no more jail, no more crimes. In my civilian life, I haven't been in a prison cell since 1999, which is about twelve years now.

Morgan writes that freedom seems like a forgotten luxury. Jail is far from my life, but when I read Morgan's letter it reminded me of those cold times when I was in prison, where I stayed invisible in fear of someone challenging me. I will not lie, prison for me was a scary thing. I feared someone would want to fight me or jump me. Prayers to God Almighty were the only thing that kept me hopeful when I was in prison. Just thinking about what Morgan was dealing with being in prison mentally, spiritually, and soulfully made me realize how much seeing the blue sky, green trees and the beautiful sunshine is a glorious blessing in itself. I related to Jerome even more when I realized the similarities of our realization. Morgan says, "educate is the root word for education, which simply means 'to bring out' the empowering gift that God has already blessed you to have."

I realized that same meaning of education when I was at Frederick A. Douglass in the SAC program. I read a book with that same definition of education, and when I read that it empowered me. I realized everything I need to know is in me already and education is to bring out.

To see someone like Morgan, to have a life without his parents and to see him live a great successful life, just to be railroaded to jail for a crime he didn't commit hurts me deep within my soul, like my soul is a sheet of paper being ripped apart then shredded. I do believe if Morgan never was sent to jail for a crime he didn't commit he would have a successful life. Even now upon his release from prison he can start where he left off and continue forward and be successful. My dad was absent from my life, just as Morgan's dad was absent from his life, but that still couldn't stop us from excelling in school and in life. If I had to speak to the youth I would tell them to get involved with programs like the SAC program I was involved in. That program caused me to excel in high school and in life as an adult. Let Morgan's life be an example of what you can do when all odds are against you. In this world, you can only pray that you will not go to jail for a crime for which you are not guilty. But

Morgan can turn his experience around by taking his experience of being innocent in jail to reach a lot of young men and women. Maybe what Morgan went through can be more powerful than we can imagine. Because his situation didn't kill Morgan's spirit and soul—it made his spirit and soul more stronger than a thousand Incredible Hulks.

When I spent time in prison and people used to tell me they were innocent of their crimes, I would laugh in my own mind and say yeah right. I mean, I figured I was guilty for my crimes, so I felt like other prisoners just were making up a lie when they said they were innocent. But Morgan's story made me wonder, what is the percentage of people in prison who are innocent of their crimes? According to an article entitled "Study Suspects Thousands of False Convictions," written on April 19, 2004 by Adam Liptak, "A comprehensive study of 328 criminal cases over the last 15 years in which the convicted person was exonerated suggests that there are thousands of innocent people in prison today." Morgan is not alone. The article also states that "The study identified 199 murder exonerations, 73 of them in capital cases. It also found 120 rape exonerations. Only nine cases involved other crimes. In more than half of the cases, the defendants had been in prison for more than 10 years."

According to a report by the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics on June 30, 2002 America's prison and the local jail population topped 2 million. Two million people in America are in jail, so the question remains, is jail my destiny? According to those numbers I have a high chance of being a prisoner. According to a report by the US Justice Department, black men born in the United States in 2001 will have a one in three chance of going to prison. More than 5.6 million Americans are either in prison or have served time there, and the number will continue to rise, according to the report. In 2001 a sixth of African American men were current or former prisoners, compared with one in 13 Latinos and one in 38 whites. I can go on and on about statistics and numbers, but you can see my point. You can see why African American men like me can go to prison, and that my chances are real high. You can see why someone like Morgan went to prison, even though he is innocent. There is a higher chance of innocent African Americans going to prison since our numbers are so high.

After over 17 years in prison, I will be glad to see Jerome Morgan freed. May he take his experience and move forward and do positive thing and succeed in the world. After 21 years in prison I'm glad to see men like Jacques Rivera, a man wrongfully convicted of murder, released. He now can go on and live his life with his wife and three children. John Thompson, who was on death row for 14 years in Angola, is now free from prison and seeking to help other falsely accused ex-prisoners. Thompson is from New Orleans and now speaks widely on injustices he sees in the criminal justice system. This can be something Morgan can have the passion to do also because in his letter he expresses the injustices of prison. A black man named Anthony Graves who was wrongfully accused of killing six people (a grandmother, her daughter, and her four grandchildren) back in 1992 now has his freedom. Graves is now fighting for his \$1.4 million for wrongful incarceration. Michael Anthony Williams was freed from prison after DNA testing proved him innocent. I can probably write a thousand page book about all the men and women who were falsely accused of murder, rape, and other crimes, but from just the few people I named, you can see where this is going. Maybe Morgan's case was based on false eyewitness testimony, or on the testimony of informants and co-defendants with personal incentive to lie. There is a continuous amount of black men being freed after spending years and even decades in jail on rape and murder convictions. They have now been freed due to technology and DNA evidence.

The "any nigger will do" policy of the American Injustice System needs to come to an end. This is the policy that prosecutors across the nation have used to destroy innocent black men to be in prison. I have never been wrongly accused of my crimes, but you can see all the black men here including Morgan who have been wrongly accused for their crime. Now you can see that universally it can be every African American who asks, *is jail my destiny?*

July 21, 2012

THE MENTALLY ILL DON'T BELONG IN JAIL

BY JADE O'CONNER, ELEANOR MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

When I was young, I used to look up to COPS. My mom always told me they were the ones who brought the bad guys in. When "COPS" came on TV, I would sit for hours in front of our 20" TV watching re-runs and singing the theme song, "bad boys, bad boys, what you gonna do what you gonna do when they come for you?" I made my mom buy me the toy badges that named me sheriff, and I would talk in my country voice and run around the house shooting people. That was my dream job. But when my brother went to jail, that all changed. My mom no longer felt that COPS were put in place to better society, and I began to see firsthand what the police called "justice:" Arresting innocent people just because there is a crime and it needs a culprit. I mean, what do they get paid for? Just arresting people willy-nilly, with no investigation and most of all no regard for society?

My brother was convicted with three charges, two of which we know are false. How do the police arrest a young man for murder, when they have the weapon and his fingerprints aren't on it? How do the police arrest a man for armed robbery, when they have the security tapes and the man on it is clearly dark-skinned, and my brother is what some people might call "red" or light-skinned, and then they have the nerve to blame the color difference on the darkness of the night? My brother is another young man whose life has been stripped away because of the clothes he wears, the style of his hair, the color of his skin, and his connections, or the lack thereof.

In my opinion and the opinion of my family members, the mentally ill don't belong in a prison setting. My brother was the oldest, and at that time I was the youngest, with my sister two years older than me and my brother three years older than she. The age gap didn't matter to me. My brother and I had more in common with each other. We liked to stick straws up our noses and turn our hands backwards to clap like walruses, we liked to play football on the neutral-ground, and we liked to sit in front of the TV playing Sonic the Hedge Hog and other video games all night. Like we did so many nights before. He was not only my brother, but he was my best friend. When he took his medicine, he could be the sweetest person in the world. And when he smiled, it could brighten up your day. But at other times my grandma would call him "the devil's child." You see, not to put his business out there, but I guess you can say my brother is "wacky."

When he was seven, he sat on my me-maw's roof and was attempting to jump off into the goldfish pond that sat below. I was either two or three and I didn't understand the full extent of the situation at the time. I just remember having the urge to stand beside him on that rooftop. I didn't understand his condition, but as I got older I realized and soon saw it from watching him swallowing pills, carving KILL onto his arms and legs, to fighting in school, being sent to juvie and ultimately the 5th floor psych ward. Just as he had no support from his grandma, his school life was the same. He was always transferring from school: Gaudet, Sherwood Forest, Livingston, Fannie C. Williams, Sarah T. Reed, Dryades (the alternative school). John F. Kennedy was his last school, where he attempted to get his G.E.D. It was a school which he said reminded him of jail. There were only small windows at the top lining of the classrooms, the food was horrible, and the respect for the students was less than worthy.

I asked my brother why he wasn't going to continue to get his G.E.D, and his reply was, "Man I ain tryna sit in no school that don give a fuck bout me when I'm tryna betta myself." He also ended up telling me stories about why he had been to so many schools and my sister and I only attended one. The children as well as faculty and staff called him retarded and slow, so he fought for respect. What did they expect, that they would get a hand-shake or something? He began to get a "record," which didn't help when he got arrested; it basically put a bull's-eye on his back. By the age of 18, his second home was "the group" as he called it (in other words, the mental institute). He had been to juvie three times and lived at two group homes through his teenage and adolescent years. So that classified him as a "criminal," well at least according to the police.

When my brother was 15 years old, he stopped taking the medicine the doctors prescribed him. That lasted three years. During that time he dropped out of school and turned to the streets of New Orleans. I felt like a piece of me was dying inside. I would try to stay up and wait for him in his room to only wake up to wet pillows. Sometimes it would be days that turned to weeks that eventually turned to months without seeing or hearing from him. Well at least that's the story I stuck to. The truth is, many times he would walk my sister and me home from school, and on the way we would skip rocks, get frozen cups and play "nigga knock" on our surrounding neighbors' doors.

According to my mother, he left and she couldn't stop him. I never had the courage to ask my mom why she wasn't able to hold on to her own flesh and blood, the son she bore, until last year. She said she couldn't stand to see her son miserable in her own care. Her main goal was to keep him happy. She also said she couldn't handle the stress and couldn't afford to keep attending parent-teacher conferences every day and having to leave work to pick him up from school when he got suspended, not to mention the numerous jobs she lost because of it. "I had two other children that needed me. What do you think y'all lives would be like if I spent every minute of the day attending to your brother? Chasing after him to take his medicine, sleeping with my money, car keys and jewelry, running back and forth to this school and that school." I was silent as tears began to roll down her cheeks. "I just didn't know what else to do," she whispered. I then realized it's not about where my brother belongs, but mostly where would he be able to get the help he needs. It doesn't help for his mental ass to be locked up with thousands of other inmates who are unaware of his history and condition.

MEN IN MY LIFE: MEN IN PRISON

BY KEISHELL PEARLEY, ELEANOR MCMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Throughout my whole life I've had to either write letters to prisons or visit family members in prison. That's the life me, Ariana, and Jade have had to live. Well, that's sort of a typical black lifestyle in New Orleans.

I've only had three males in my life that I cherish and love besides God. These are my father and two eldest brothers. Growing up, they all were there to defend me when I was both wrong and right, and they promised to be there no matter what. Up until I was seven years old, they all stuck to that promise. My father went to jail a week before Easter Sunday, and I witnessed the entire arrest. From the walk to the store up until the police slammed him on the car. My daddy was sentenced to five years after being falsely accused of robbing a gas station. I honestly think that the whole arrest was inappropriate because I was with my father the whole time at the gas station, and what person you know would rob the gas station with a small child?

My oldest brother, who was arrested when I was eleven, went to jail after being accused of shooting a man and stealing his car. Lastly, my second oldest brother was arrested when I was 16 years old after he was charged with armed robbery.

I've come to a realization that the police system is a defect on our city and lives. It has affected my life both mentally and physically. From the stereotyping, to the mistaken identity, they knocked my life off track completely. I'm not saying that my father and brothers never did anything wrong, but what happened to innocent until proven guilty? How come they never got their chance to prove themselves innocent?

My brother on my mother's side (Norman) is now in Orleans Parish Prison awaiting trial on an armed robbery charge. He was sitting on his grandmother's porch while police ran up the street looking for someone. They came onto the porch and tackled him and arrested him. My brother didn't have any warrants for his arrest, but they felt that since he was already in the system, they could take him in. The policemen in New Orleans and in other places are such crooks. One cop also planted marijuana on my brother for possession of an illegal drug, but that charge was dropped. The fact that the jails are being filled up with mostly innocent people serves no

purpose in the city's future. According to an article on incarceration called "The Incarceration Capital of the U.S." the city receives \$10,000 per prisoner. I think that the city is being money hungry, but some may look at it as "protecting and serving." The crime will continue to increase while the city will have to constantly raise funds to expand the prisons in New Orleans. My brother's trial has been pushed back six times over the past year.

When the police arrested my father, they arrested him based on the color of his shirt and the darkness of his skin. But they didn't think to estimate the time between walking from Earhart to Audubon to see if it really was my daddy who robbed the gas station. Did they know my father would be out of my life for five years, even after the video showed that it wasn't him? I'm happy the policemen were doing their job, but they did it in an unfair way. I had to write my father letters and send him cards for Father's Day, birthdays, and Christmas. I could not hug him and tell him I loved him. My mother had to step up and be both mother and father. Attending award ceremonies, report card conferences, and tending to our health needs—my mother did it all by herself. Though my daddy was in prison, he still worked two jobs and decided to send me and my oldest brother (his other child) \$500 of his savings.

Most people say having a parent in prison affects the child's way of life and he/she begins to act out, but that's true not in all cases. The fact that he was out of my life didn't have a huge effect upon my life, but it did upon my brother's life. I still made A's in school and still had great behavior in school. My brother Keith, on the other hand, seemed to be highly affected by the arrest. He dropped out of school and began selling and smoking weed. Though he never was arrested before he was sentenced, he still had the mindset that he was going to end up dead or in jail. He is now serving a 46-year sentence in a prison in Texas for attempted murder, armed robbery, and possession of a stolen vehicle. His friends had robbed a man and shot him in the head. The next day my brother was driving the car and was arrested. He and his friends were charged for the crime, but his friends were released. The victim wasn't able to open his eyes to point out the suspects, but my brother had no witnesses. He had a child of his own who was on its way into this world. Now the child has to grow up years without her father in her life. That is going to hurt both the mother and child, because the mother has to take care of the child alone, and because his daughter will have no father in her life.

Someone needs to do something fast because earned badges are to protect and serve not to be unfair and hurt. No one really knows the true reason why so many men are incarcerated and who's to blame. If, as a report by Connie Cass states "1 of every 75 U.S. men are in prison" and the U.S. is the number one country with the most number of incarcerated men (715,000), do we blame the males who aren't being father figures, or do we blame the country for its messed up system? I blame both, because everyone incarcerated isn't innocent, but at the same time the country is money hungry and is willing to do anything to receive funds. The correct way isn't locking up innocent men.

Another problem the system has is that it holds inmates even after they haven't found any evidence. John Thompson, a man whom I interviewed, was one of these victims of being falsely accused. He went to jail at the age of 18 years old, leaving behind two kids, an 18-month-old and an unborn. He was accused of armed robbery and the murder of a rich hotel owner's son. He served over 20 years and was later exonerated the day before his execution date. He said the relationship between his kids was really strong, even though there was a big swamp, barbed wires and a huge wall between them. His kids were raised by their mother for over 20 years. For 20 years their father wasn't in their lives. For 20 years the D.A. and judge lied and hid evidence. He proclaimed how he doesn't think that incarceration affects the children's lives, especially not his, because his son graduated as the salutatorian. No one really can answer this question, not because there isn't enough research but because every person has her own opinion and experience of this view on freedom being taken away from these men and their children!

A FATHERLESS CHILD

BY NIA STEWART, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

From 1984 to 1998, the incarceration rate for the nation as a whole went up by 61% (Shelden). My dad went to jail in 1998, the year my little sister was born. He was officially a part of the 1998 statistics.

I asked my mother what happened, and she told me, “I went into the bathroom, and I told your dad to watch Tiera. She was three months old, and he told me he would keep an eye on her while I took a quick shower. Fifteen minutes later, I walked out of the bathroom and Tiera was lying there by herself. ‘Ronnie!’ I said aloud to see if he was somewhere throughout the house. I received no answer. He was gone. This was the last time I saw him and heard from him until I received a collect call.”

Recently I interviewed my father, and I asked him if he remembered the day he became incarcerated. His response was no.

I began: “November 2, 1998: This was the last day we saw you before you became incarcerated.”

Puts head down

“How does that make you feel?”

“Horrible.”

“So what was life like in prison?”

“Life was horrible. I was there and away from my family for ten years. That hurt me the most.”

“Really?”

“Yea, all I did was wish I could be with my family again. I felt pathetic and as if I was a failure as a father and a husband when I was in jail” (R. Stewart).

I was four, my oldest sister was five, and my youngest sister was three months old. Daddy was gone, but we were too young to understand what was going on. Before my father began his ten-year incarceration period, I was Daddy’s little girl, and I didn’t have a want for anything. My oldest sister and I had it all: all the games, the toys, and the clothes you could think of. We were spoiled. I loved my dad so much. He used to call me his “roll-potna” because whenever he had to run errands, I was right behind him—daddy’s little shadow. Whenever he had to go to work, I would cry and pull on the bottom of his leg to stop him. We were close. That all changed at the age of eight when my mom told me what was really going on. Before I turned eight, I always asked my mom, “Where’s Daddy, momma?”

“He’s on the boat sweetheart.”

“Well when is he coming back?”

“He’ll be back soon.”

This conversation was numerous times over the next four years until my mom finally told my sisters and me where my dad really was.

“Girls?”

“Yes?”

“Sit down, I have something to tell you,” my mother said. “You know when you guys ask me where your Dad is and how I always tell you he’s on the boat working? Well, Daddy’s not really on the boat. He’s in jail.”

Mothers find it more beneficial to explain to their young children that their fathers are absent for various false reasons, because mothers are afraid that if told the truth, children may pattern their behavior after the imprisoned parent or become frightened (Hannon).

We all cried. We wanted our father, but we couldn’t have him. He was gone for years, and we didn’t know how to deal with it. My dad began using drugs about a year before he became incarcerated, and he went to jail for armed robbery and burglary.

I asked him, “Did you think about us and how your actions would affect us?”

“No, Daddy was not in his right state of mind, and I know that is selfish of me to say.”

“If you had the chance to go back in time, would you have done anything different?”

“Yes, of course. I wouldn’t have committed a crime in the first place, had I known the consequences and how your lives would be without me. Lord knows I didn’t want any of that to happen, but I guess that’s what happens when you make stupid decisions” (R. Stewart).

As months passed, we adapted to not having a father, even though it was hard for my mother. She was a single parent. My mom had a job at Harrah’s Casino making good money, but she had to quit because there was no one there to take care of my baby sister. According to research, mothers are likely to leave their places of employment after paternal incarceration, because they soon become overburdened with child care needs in the face of financial deadlines (Arditti).

When my dad went away, it was as if we had still had both parents. My mom played both roles. She was very strict with us. She always would say, “Knowledge is power, and get your education.” Ever since then, those words have been implanted in me.

Even though my mom acted as mother and father, I still missed my Dad. I missed our close relationship, and it seemed like it was going to take forever to get it back. As years passed, I just let it go. When the good memories about my Dad began to fade, the bad thoughts started to occur. I remember when I was ten years old I still lived on Clouet Street, but not in the same house. I woke up in the morning to use the bathroom. I flicked the light switch on, but there was no light. The lights were off. I wondered why I was sweating in my sleep the night before and how the windows were up to feel a cool breeze.

My mom struggled a lot to keep the bills paid, food on the table, a house to live in and clothes on our back. It was hard being a single parent raising three girls by herself. We lived paycheck to paycheck. When a parent is incarcerated, “mothers experience risk on several dimensions: via emotional stress, parenting strain, work-family conflict, financial strain...and social stigma” (Arditti). Thank God my aunt was there to help us out because I don’t know what we would have done without her! I always used to say, “I wish Daddy was here so we wouldn’t have to live like this.” I soon realized that he was the reason why my life was the way it was. I personally didn’t think I deserved it. As I got older, around 11, I started to feel like my dad was a disgrace to mankind because he betrayed us. His job as a man and a father was to take care of his family, and he didn’t keep that promise. I remember when he would call from jail and I really didn’t care to talk to him. It was like I had some kind of hatred inside me. I felt like my dad ruined my life. I shouldn’t have struggled. I wanted to be a girl with a full family, not living in a one-parent household. The recent disintegration of the African American family is due in large part to the mass imprisonment of black fathers (Jill).

Despite the fact that I was missing a father, I still managed to make good grades and stay on a good path in life. I was going in the opposite way of statistics. Some studies show that children living in single-parent households or living with an absence of the father are more likely to drop out of school, begin to use drugs and alcohol, commit suicide, become trouble-makers, become involved in criminal activity, become pregnant as a teen, fail to succeed in life and be less likely to go to college (Ketteringham), (Fathers & Families), (Why Fathers Count | Fathers for Good). When conducting my interview with my father, I was curious to know how he felt about the absence of father in households. He said, “I think it’s not a good thing. I think children should grow up with both parents” (R. Stewart).

I am still amazed by those statistics every time I see them. I can honestly say that none of them apply to me. I am now 17 years old. I haven’t used any drugs or alcohol. I have not thought about committing suicide, and I have not been to jail a day in my life. I am a senior in high school, and I have been accepted into Xavier University here in New Orleans, Louisiana. I plan to major in Pre- Medicine and become a pediatrician. I will be successful, and I’m proud to say that I’m one of those kids who are not a part of these tragic statistics. During the interview, I informed my father about the statistics of children with the absence of a father in their household. I asked him, “Are you happy to have children that’s not a part of those numbers?”

“Yes, I’m very proud of you all.”

“I’m proud of us, too. I am a little disappointed in you for making us go through so much, but this experience has made me stronger, smarter and wiser.”

What I also got from that experience of my dad being incarcerated was to always be strong, get an education, strive for success, stay on a positive path, and be the best that I could be so I won’t have to struggle another day in my life. My dad had a troubled past, and I told myself that he is the opposite of what I want to be in life. I didn’t want to be like my father at all. Up to this day, I make sure, and my mother makes sure, that my sisters and I do not turn in the wrong direction. Most children without fathers usually take a negative path in life, but I didn’t. I am proud of myself, Nia Cherese Stewart, the fatherless child.

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JUDGMENT AT DISNEY STORE

BY SHE'ANKA JOHNSON, MCDONOGH 25 HIGH SCHOOL

Have you ever felt as if someone was watching you, and you really didn't understand why? Well, I have.

One day, my sister and our friends were all walking through the Riverwalk, browsing through the stores and enjoying smoothies. We decided to walk through the Disney Store, and I felt a sudden rush of excitement because I am a huge Disney fan. As we entered through the doors, I noticed the cashier glance our way and whisper to the other employee, who happened to be dressed as Snow White.

We began exploring the games, figures, and many costumes of the store, but I noticed that Snow White seemed to appear on each aisle just seconds after we did. A young white female entered the store soon after, yet no one glanced, whispered, or even offered assistance to her. My sister and our friends were their main focus.

My friend TAZ decided that he wanted to buy an item that cost about \$14.00. I followed him as he walked to the cash register to pay. When he started to remove a \$20 bill from his pocket to pay for the toy, I reached over to him, grabbed the money, and told him we were leaving the store. He mentioned that he was about to buy something, and I spoke just loud enough for the cashier and Snow White to hear: "We're leaving. Nobody wants to buy from a store where they follow people who aren't white."

My sister and our other friends all agreed with what I said. Snow White and the cashier looked extremely shocked. They seemed surprised that we knew they followed us, or that we were smart enough to realize you shouldn't buy from people who can't trust a person because of his or her skin color.

This upset me so much that I don't think I'll ever enter that Disney store again. I was angry because they judged us the minute we walked into the store. We each had at least \$20 or \$30 in our pockets, which was enough to buy just about anything a kid could want out of a toy store. The cashier and Snow White didn't wait to find any of this out, so they missed out on any chance of getting money from us. These Disney Store employees made me realize that no matter where I am, someone judges me the minute I walk into the room.

EVERY LITTLE STEP

BY TERRIOUES WHITE, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

"Mom can I go around the corner?"

"For what"? my mother suspiciously asked.

"Because I want to go by my friends."

"Ok you can go. Just be careful walking around that corner, and I don't want you coming home too late!"

"Well, what's late?"

"7:45," she stated.

"What! Mama it's 6:30 now. You always do that. You been treating me like I'm 12 ever since I turned 16. Besides it's only one block away."

“Do what you want then,” she clamored, as I grabbed my sweater and walked out the door. As I sprinted up the block in excitement, I always wondered to myself why momz was so nervous. I mean it is a dangerous life that we live, but I’m pretty sure it’s not that bad.

. . .

“Momz was trippin’ just now dude.”

“Like always.” he replied.

“That lady really told me to be home at 7:30. I guess I’ll be home at 8:45 like usual.”

When I decided to walk home, it was a little earlier than usual, about 8:20. For some reason I decided to count my steps. Nothing special—I guess just curiosity, boredom. Wrapped up in my snug black hoodie with my head bowed to the ground I started to count. “One, two, three, four.” When I got to my favorite number being 21, I looked up and I was in front of this massive church that sat on the corner. I noticed it was a little darker than usual. One of the street lights had gone out. There was a little light from the church but not that much. Then I suddenly saw this guy running up the street. “He fast as hell, but what the hell he running for?” I thought. He looked like a big shadow slashing down the block. “22, 23, 24,” I began to count again.

Speeding down the block this black Tahoe came to a sudden stop at the corner I was standing on. I could tell it was a Tahoe because it was going so fast the traffic camera with its illuminating light made a way for me to see the Chevy sign on the front. The screeching of the tires stopping sent my heart racing. A sense of nervousness took over me. The Tahoe stopped in the middle of the street. The driver’s side window went down. With the little time it took for the window to roll down, my eyes grew and my body stood still. Realizing that they thought I was the guy they were after, my eyes went into a hard stare at the glare of a silver gun reflecting off the little light I had. “So this is how I’m gonna die. Mistaken identity. Just because of my black hoodie.”

The hardest, most still five seconds of my life passed with the screeching of tires peeling off turning the block. The sound broke my stillness, and I took off running.

I swear it took me fifty minutes to run one block. Five minutes passed with every step I took. Or at least it felt that way. I can remember nothing running through my mind. I guess I just reacted out of instinct. When I got inside, I collapsed on my bed, mostly in shock because I was almost a victim, a statistic. That was one thing I didn’t want to become. My mom walked in the room. “Why you sweatin’ boy.”

“Nothing, just a little jog,” I replied. She liked to over exaggerate, and I didn’t want to become a prisoner of my room.

BOOM! “I guess they caught him,” I thought to myself. That was the day I decided to make a transition. Since then I guess I started to make little changes to distinguish myself. So that whether you knew me or not, I was different. I just know that all black hoodies aren’t a part of that wardrobe.

HOME ARREST

BY WILL

BOOM!!!! The sound of something falling all over the place vibrates through the apartment. These sounds have been scaring me my whole life. Being so young I knew what was going on but I didn’t know what to do. This happened before but I was most likely unable to understand what was going on. BITCH!!!! SHUT UP!!!! As I hear swings of a belt hit the skin of a person.

There I was, a scared little boy, hadn't even had my first fight, not even old enough to go to the third grade. I called the police. When I called I didn't say anything, I just let them listen to the loud noises. The police showed up in ten minutes, most likely because I lived in the East (I say this because of a stereotype of police being hours late). I knew they showed up because I didn't hear the loud noises any more. That's when I knew the boys in blue were there. I was so scared. I told them everything I knew.

Why is this a significant moment in my life, even though there were so many others? Maybe because this was the first of many I remember. People ask me why am I so rough, or why am I so violent. How should I respond? Should I tell them my story, should I blow it off and tell them I don't know and that it's not my fault, or should I keep quiet and leave them to make their own conclusions? I pick the last one. This situation has made me not want to be around myself. Seeing your family fight can really mess a kid up. This has made me have so much shit just built up inside my head. I don't know, I guess this has made me, ME.

MY NEW ORLEANS IDENTITY

BY RICHARD "SLIM" CHATTMON, ELEANOR MCMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

New Orleans: a city unlike any place in the world. A city where you can have fun. A city where you can meet new people. A city where your identity is shown. New Orleans is a wonderful place where you can find your true self. I was able to find myself here in this city.

As I lie down looking at the sky in Audubon Park, I close my eyes and think about all the events that I went through. From being put in the hospital, to moving in with my mother, to living in Texas after Hurricane Katrina, to living back down here in New Orleans and now being an 11th grader at McMain. I remember the day I lost my identity for the first time. I was living in the Magnolia Project, and my father called me by a different name. My father's name was Kim, so he wanted to give me a name that had a least two letters that were in his name. And what name did he choose? He chose Slim. I adopted the name and created a new identity and forgot about the old one. Before I adopted the name Slim, I was Richard, a quiet, but troublemaking little kid. I was wild and always looking for fun. I knew how to hotwire cars at a young age because I learn fast, so I would help my people start the car and we would go for a ride. Once we were done with the car we would go and sell it to someone for a cheap price. We had to make our money, so we did what we could: steal cars, sell drugs, etc. Life was hard back in the day, having to keep running from the cops and trying to survive living in the Magnolia Project.

The relationship that Kim and I had was the same as Ms. Viola and Wilton from the Junebug Productions' new play, *Lockdown*. You see, Wilton was Ms. Viola's grandson, and she always called him her "little sunflower." The love and passion that they had created an identity for both of them, one that could also change over the years. Wilton's identity started to change, but he was still Ms. Viola's "little sunflower." Now, I don't know what happened to Wilton over the years, but his identity did change. The difference between Wilton and me is that Wilton's identity started changing as he made his transition into an alternative school. With me, my identity changed the day I adopted the name Slim, then fully became Slim when I put on that mask. Now I am looking back up at the sky, and I see how my life has changed since then.

I remember the day when I was running from the cops in Texas. I moved to San Antonio after Hurricane Katrina, and life wasn't always easy out there. Like when I was framed for something I didn't do. Apparently, I had stolen some shoes from this Mexican kid. Till this day I still think it was a funny memory. I always had a history of getting into trouble, no matter where I was. I will always be at the wrong place at the wrong time. I

mean, I tried so hard to stay out of trouble, but being a victim of these streets isn't always easy. It is harder to get out of trouble than to get into it. What did I do to look like the prime suspect?

Then again, the whole thing was a lie, so was it racial profiling or was it that they did not want me in their city? Everything that happened to me out there in Texas reminds me of Robert Charles in *Mob Rule In New Orleans* by Ida B. Wells. What happened with Robert Charles and his friend was that they were just hanging out on the stairs when two cops showed up and accused them of disturbing the peace. A huge gunfight broke out, which caused both Robert Charles and one of the cops to be injured in battle. Robert's friend decided to surrender, while Robert Charles escaped with a shot wound to the leg. Like Robert Charles, when I was falsely arrested, I didn't give up, not yet at least. I kept running because I knew I didn't do anything, but was the cop going to listen to me, a young African American trying to make it out here in this new city after being forced out of my home by a storm?

My situation in Texas reminds me of a young Vietnamese student who graduated from McMinn. I read her story "Vietnamese In New Orleans" in *The Long Ride*, a book on the history of social justice and civil rights in New Orleans written by young people in the same Students at the Center community that I'm in. What happened with her is that before she was born her family used to live in Vietnam. Her family wanted to leave Vietnam and come to America, but they didn't have enough tickets for everyone to leave Vietnam. The brother made the decision to stay with the grandfather in Vietnam and let the rest of the family leave to go to America. As I was running from the cop, I realized what my father did for me. He knew that by giving custody of me to my mother I would find true happiness, and I guess he realized that I would also be able to find my true identity. I never was mad at my father for leaving me with my mother. I knew he was doing the right thing. It was that connection that Kim and I had that most guys wish they had with their fathers. The connection that Kim and I had was special. We were always in sync, so he always knew what I was feeling. So when Hurricane Katrina came, Kim left with my grandmother to help take care of her while I stayed in New Orleans with my mother. As I think about what my father did I realized that I should just give up. I knew that Kim wouldn't want me to run from the cops because he taught me better than that. I gave up and decided to let the cops take me in.

As I sat in the cell I thought about all the trouble I had been in before coming to Texas. I thought about how the cops in New Orleans are just like the cops in Texas. They didn't give me a fair trial. They just brought me to court and the judge said "Guilty." Lucky for me, the kid who blamed me for stealing his shoes dropped the charges three days later. His name was Nick, and he told me how his peers in school told him about people in New Orleans, how easily they can betray you and how they can get you into trouble. I told him that it was all right, and I forgave him. After that we became best friends. I taught him everything about New Orleans culture and about what we do when it comes down to having fun. That was one of my best moments in Texas. I was finally beginning to find my identity again.

Looking back up at the sky the situation that I talked about earlier with the cops got me thinking about *Floodlines*. In chapter six of *Floodlines*, author Jordan Flaherty writes about the justice system and the educational system in the prison: how the cops always disrespect the old and new inmates. They abuse their power and attack the prisoners for no reason. They force the prisoner to strip and make sexual gestures to each other. I was lucky that the cops in Texas were different from the cops in New Orleans, even though most of them were racist. They didn't abuse their power as much as the cops in New Orleans. It is as if you can just read my life and see everything about me. But just open my soul like a page in the book and these words that I'm writing might be misunderstood. And if I'm dishonest then bring me back me to my knees so show me why I'm even able to speak. These words were going through my mind as I sit in the cell. If I was to end up like those guys like in Angola, would I feel the same as them? So why am I able to speak? Because I owned my life, not the justice

system. If the justice system was to own my life, then I'd be a slave who has no life. But I know I have my rights and the right to "Freedom Of Speech." So if I said that I didn't steal those shoes, then I didn't steal those shoes.

It is funny how "Trouble" can find you anywhere and force you into marrying her. I can never get away from "Trouble" or her cousins "Death," "Life," and "Hope," or whom I refer to as the three sisters. You see I'm in this relationship with all four family members, and the one who always spends time with me the most is "Death." Let's take a look back at *The Long Ride* and how the young Vietnamese student I mentioned before lost her grandfather, whom she never got the chance to meet. Death likes to choose who her victims are and take her time with most of them before her victims expire and move on to the next world. I remember the day Death and I got married, and she told me she was never going to leave me. She was always a jealous wife and never liked any of my friends. The first person she took from me was a good friend of mine named Brittany. Brittany was always there for me and we had a lot in common. She never left my side whenever I was depressed. Then the next person she took was Fredrick Youngblood or "Yungblood" as we will call him. Zach, Phil, and Young D were all a part of her list. She never wanted me have any friends to begin with, and when I tried to divorce her she said she was sorry and I always bring her back into my life and I don't know why. Then there was "Hope" who always said that she would be there for me. But when I got shot in the back, where were you when I was in the hospital and I needed you? But, you weren't there and you left me there to die then showed up days later saying you're sorry. I trusted you and you betrayed me. You left me for another man who didn't even treat you right. Being hopped up on meth you tried to help him by marrying him and giving him all the hope and love that I needed. But he left you when he was killed trying to steal meth from a drug dealer that had lived around the corner. "Life" the oldest sister and my first wife - you are so beautiful yet so betraying. When I go to sleep at night you are not there. So why are you walking away, was it something I did? Did I make a mistake? I'm trying to deal with the pain, I don't understand this, is this how it ends? Sunni Patterson once said in her poem "We Know This Place," "Where is the peace huh? Where is the love?" So where is the peace and love in this world? Sunni Patterson, you have me thinking about these kinds of questions. I thank you for these questions. You help me with my life situations with these questions you put into your poems.

I am walking down Canal St. with my mind on the questions that I was thinking of and also the questions that I read when listening to Sunni Patterson's poem. I thought about the love and peace that she mentions in "We Know This Place." Then I started to think about the love and peace with my inner-self. What do I feel about my identity changing? Was I really the same person I used to be? No, I knew I wasn't the same person, I was something different. A new person who was born and raised in the streets of New Orleans, whose identity changed as soon as he put on the mask and adopted a new name. I was something, no someone, different. I was immortal. I became immortal when I married "Death" and I signed my entire life away. No friends, no faith, no feeling toward anything. I was turning into a creature that comes from purgatory. If I really was to accept this new identity, I would have to learn to accept the fact that all my true friends are gone and the more I keep this feeling bottled up inside, the more my identity changes. The more I became this creature, the more I forget who I really am. But I did learn that I don't have to go through this alone. I can unlock who I really am when the time comes, but for now it's time that I leave this world and go on the rest of my journey to find my identity.

This is just the beginning of my story. If you want to learn more about my life, you can read it in the trilogy of the "The Black Philosopher's Stone." I know why I was put on this Earth; I now know who I am. I'm not just Slim, but Richard the lion-hearted. This is who my father wanted me to be. And I will continue to find Richard, for I'm my father's keeper.

Waking up in the morning I look up at the sky
Watch as my soul leaves my sleepless eyes
Hoping to find freedom from this imprisonment
The love I once felt when I was just a kid
Why I'm the only one you love is it that u want a thug
We got married at a young age
But you just love to take my friends away
My boy Nick decided to kill himself
Because all he could hear was the name "Death"
I pick up the gun and put it to my head but
But you stop because you don't want me dead
I love but I also hate you
But you bound to my soul
So I'm an immortal kid
And every day when I see your face
I just want to forget your name

RECKLESS ENDANGERMENT

BY ASHLEY JONES, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL AND SAC STAFF MEMBER

The night before my sister called with the news, I was sitting in the mustard yellow and grass green restaurant, O'Henry's, with my best friend turned boyfriend, turned ex, turned best friend again Smokey. He reminded me of a scene I hadn't thought about since sophomore year of college when it happened. Smokey said, after carefully watching me stuff a fork full of loaded fries down my mouth, "I miss making love to you." I laughed loudly at the thought of us, and how surprised he was at the little-girl-turned-woman he had known for more than 17 years. Smokey is the only person in the world I could talk to about any and everything without ever having to feel embarrassed or ashamed. So we each took turns recounting various acts of love and laughed like we were laughing at two different people, not us, not the people at this table loaded with food, not these same bodies. I was happy to see his smile. On the drive to the restaurant Smokey had expressed serious thoughts of suicide. After taking a huge gulp of his Sprite he hooted, "Man, we did some wild and crazy stuff." I too took a gulp of my tea.

The rain had just tapered off, and I had just finished watching one of my favorite movies when my sister, Kenda, called to tell me that her best friend Michelle had finally confessed a truth Kenda and I had already known. Michelle's 25-year-old brother, Michael, did in fact have HIV and was now in a wheelchair. No longer able to take care of himself, Michael was on his way to what Michelle called, "a living facility." My heart was resting on my bladder. I cradled my lower stomach to feel if it was still beating. My brain whirled around until the only thing hanging in the after breeze of a whizzing mind was Chantel. Chantel was the cousin I had recently buried due to AIDS. She was 26 and leaves in her memory two small traumatized babies, a mother and father who a year and a half earlier buried my little cousin Mike, and two brothers, the older of which is living with HIV himself. Since her death, I have had the strange feeling that Chantel is haunting me. Or maybe it is

the sore reality that I had forgotten about her while she was here. I hadn't seen her in about four years. The saddest part about is that we lived in the same city. When I ran into my uncle Ronnie or my cousins Mike or Baby, I didn't even ask about her. Now in the aftermath of her death, I feel the need to ask questions that maybe only she could answer. I want to know how she felt when she knew she was going to die. Or if the backseat, backyard, backroom sex she had was worth the disease she acquired. Or if promiscuous sex was even the culprit. After all, she was a drug user and needles her choice medium into the underworld. I want to know her two children's names and ages. I had only seen them once in their whole entire existence, and I doubt seriously that they could give an educated guess as to who I am.

Since she is no longer here, I ask my sister.

"Kenda, don't they know that there are medicines that could prolong Michael's life? Don't they know it's not good to be ignorant? That silence would hurt him more than help?"

"I don't know Ashley," my sister snarled like older siblings do when the younger ones need to be restrained. Being a well-trained younger sibling, I become quiet. "I'll call you later," Kenda said and hung up the phone before I could say goodbye. Falling back on the eggshell white sofa in the living room, my thoughts landed on Smokey and me. During our sexual relationship we were quite reckless, and being lucky, we were not going to die from it.

On the ride to the restaurant I had been trying to convince Smokey that we were indeed very lucky. Unlike most of the people we grew up calling our friends, we were in our early twenties and had no children, no divorces, were not in prison and the biggest blessing of all, we were not dead. See, Smokey and I represent a generation marked by violence, insecurities and ignorance. We were not supposed to make it. Especially Smokey. He started selling drugs and running with a much older crowd by 13. By 15 he was "big ballin" and out of control. His mother battled crack addiction and alcoholism most of our young lives, and his daddy, who is now like a best friend, was never really around. Smokey had played Russian roulette with his future since the beginning, and just about everyone was betting that he was going to lose.

I remember the day Ega, Smokey's friend, was murdered for participating in the same drug game Smokey had gotten out of some years before. We drove to a park where people rarely go. I nestled my body into the crack between the passenger side door and the seat. Smokey fixed his eyes on the rearview mirror, almost like he was watching a movie of his past playing in front of him. He told me that he found Ega and that Ega looked at him before taking his final breath. Tears were falling down Smokey's eyes, and he told me that they were not for Ega but for me. He said that he couldn't stand to lose me, that every time I got on a plane to go somewhere it made him nervous. He said that I was the only person he would go crazy over if I left him. Smokey took a deep breath and looked at me. The initially slow rolling tears careening down his cheeks illuminated for the first time a softness I had never seen.

I didn't cry. Instead I watched every tear fall off the slope of his face. I tried hard to think of a silver lining in the gloomy, dingy cloud hovering over the moment. I couldn't find one and told Smokey to bring me home.

People might call Smokey and me survivors, survivors of our own rowdy past, of our mistakes, of our secret disappointments and horrors. But the question looming in his mind that night in the car is the same as the one that has taunted and pushed me my whole life. How long? I tried to answer this question for Smokey. Instead I uttered, "just hold on." I found that same question seething in me at that very moment. I had never really told Smokey that just like him, I have been and still am in the fight of my life. For him, just like many others of my close friends, I've always seemed to have it easy. I grew up with two great parents who didn't do drugs, who didn't beat or curse me. I have loving brothers and sisters, and I always managed to do very well in school

without ever having to study. I could never form the habit. What Smokey doesn't know is that I struggle with the thought that maybe I wasn't supposed to survive.

Like Smokey, I do not come from a family of achievers. Most of my family members have never graduated high school, let alone college. None of them have traveled outside of the state or country as I have. Most of the women have become teenage mothers before reaching the age of 17, and if drugs and alcohol didn't stunt the growth of the males, then their young fatherhood and the responsibility of it has. Most of them are proud of me and maybe a bit jealous. I am often treated like the special one. I get inquiries about my jobs, my experiences, my life. I am glorified as the odd man out, but why do I feel strangely similar?

I have been examining myself for years. I have mentally noted all of my worst traits and tendencies. I can have a monstrous temper with a serious violent streak to boot. I find myself sometimes hanging with the wrong crowd just to be reminded of the me I was years ago. I have even succumbed to the urge to dumb myself down in certain arenas so as not to scare off or make ashamed the "common folk" that comprise my close family and friends. I realize that I have even played Russian roulette with my own future in the past.

Like my junior year at 35 when I allowed a few of my neighborhood friends who were running from the police to stuff their plastic bags of crack and money in the pockets of my plaid pants and maroon jacket, which I always kept wrapped around my waist no matter the weather. And how I had assigned myself the dangerous task of having to walk about the 3rd ward to locate each of them to give back their paraphernalia before the police or my mother could catch me. I was asked to do it because of my uniform. No cop would expect a female from McDonogh 35 to be holding. I didn't quite believe the theory, since I had been with them on shakedowns and was often times spotted with them on my aunt's porch by the police.

Or the time in college when I found myself arrested and almost jailed when the two friends I was hanging with had weapons and weed on them. I didn't know about the weapons or the weed, but then again, I didn't know too much about these friends, since I had just met them on the street that Saturday afternoon.

At the time, I did not consider these actions and many others to be destructive. But now I understand that at certain times I have attempted to commit an emotional suicide. I had purposely planted myself in the crossfire of potentially dangerous situations just to see how well I could dodge the bullets. So that I could show off the leg or the arm or the stomach scarred and singed by a much too close call. Like Smokey and the many survivors of Hurricane Katrina shuffling their way back to New Orleans, I am suffering from survivor's guilt.

How does one react when it is discovered that out of a block of 50 demolished homes, yours is the only one battered but still standing? Is it possible to be proud of yourself for having the tenacity to hang on to whatever it is sustaining your life while your friends and family are drowning and drifting away in the same murky waters that are keeping you afloat? How can you explain your survival? How can we have second lines and sit in cool, air conditioned restaurants with loaves of French bread spilling over with shrimp or catfish or oysters on our plates? How can you pick up the pieces when so many lives have been shattered?

Thinking about the strength and courage of the people of New Orleans, I have become clearer about Smokey's thoughts of suicide and my own attempts. The survivor must make a choice. Do I continue to struggle or let go? In too many cases it would be so much easier to let go of all of your dreams, your goals and submerge yourself into the hungry waters waiting to suck out your breath. It might even be appeasing, since you know exactly how you will end up. The unknown is always scary. And most survivors not only live with the guilt of surviving but the fear of it. Surviving means a continuous effort to stay strong, to do well, to heal and recover from atrocities.

I looked into Smokey's eyes that night and thought of friends who didn't make it. I wanted to tell him that the worst was over, that we had beaten the odds. That we were made stronger because of it, and even if we failed,

we wouldn't completely drown because our lungs could now withstand the pressure of the water closing in. In my heart I wanted to believe that our fight was over, but I couldn't lie. I just looked at him and whispered, "Just hold on."

PARTIAL MELANCHOLY

BY ATIKA BOOZE, ELEANOR MCMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Your Daddy spoiled you Tika. That's what your problem was for the longest. You always depended on him. If you were hungry, if you were hurting, you ran to him. And it wasn't a bad thing neither, for he favored you. Before he went to jail, you were a sight of perfection. Your grades, high as the heavens; you had friends by the busload. You were always smiling. Always happy for no reason. But, your happiness made us all happy.

I remember when you were only six years old, you were on the principal's list. I was so proud of you. Richard used to come to me and show me your report cards, barely containing his joy. He used to look at me and say, "Mama, that's my baby." Your mama used to look at Richard with disgust. He never treated her right. I remember telling him, "Brandy gone leave you one day, nigga." Oh, but your daddy didn't understand how good he had it until he got locked up. Remember a few weeks back, when you told me that y'all were learning about the justice system? I know he's my son, but he got what he deserved. Your daddy told me he calls your phone, and you don't answer; he writes, and you don't reply.

With your daddy working at that Avondale, he provided for y'all. Now I'm not sure if his incarceration had anything to do with it, but I know Avondale closed down after that, though you say they were already in the slumps before the situation.

I watched you go cold after that. From the time he went to jail, until you were about 13, you never claimed your friends. Six years: "They're just going to leave anyways," you used to say. Now I watch how you treat boys. In 9th grade, you were telling me you liked some boy. I guess that went bad 'cause baby girl, your heart is cold as ice. When that little curly-haired, light-skinned boy comes around, y'all look like a match. But every time I ask you, you laugh and say, "Grandma, that boy just like me. I don't trust him." And even as you roll your eyes at me now, you know I'm telling the truth.

I blame your daddy. Leaving y'all like that. He never taught you or your sister, Kayla, the way to go. Now Kayla is pregnant, and you're drifting off into seclusion. And you tell me every day that you don't like Ri'Seana, but that's your sister. Stubborn you, you don't want to hear that. I worry for my grandchildren. The only relief I find in you is that little ray of sunshine when we go to the fair every year: Your smile, all too warm, your presence welcomed.

I can only await the day you find love.

I believe you are beautiful, and you only deserve the best, but you refuse to settle. But, in due time, I believe that you'll find that one thing special to you, as your father did in you.

And you'll never let go.

CURIOSITY AND IMPERIALISM AFFECTING MY
RELATIONSHIP WITH MY GRANDPA
BY BRANDON MERCADEL, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

Since I can remember, I have always known myself to be a curious person. I have always been eager to know about something, even if it had nothing to do with me. I don't know why I am this way. It is just a habit I haven't been able to break. I used to think when I was young that I was always curious about everything because I just wanted to know everything, which is sort of true. I don't find it a bad characteristic, but it can get me labeled as nosy sometimes. One day, I really found myself sitting down thinking about the reason for my overwhelming curiosity towards things. To my surprise, I found the truth in my answer when I thought about my relationship with my grandfather on my dad's side.

Now before I could start to really remember faces, I was always curious about why I would always see this familiar figure only a couple times in my early childhood. This figure became so familiar because whenever he came around he had this face of sorrow seeking forgiveness. I know now that the figure was my grandfather because as I get older I see the same face he has from my dad, my brothers, and even from me when I stare into the mirror. We all share this face because we are Mercadel men. This face is known to all of us because we all know that we're not perfect and that we have done something that has made the hair on someone's skin raise up as if they were a porcupine. For example, I am told by my mother that I aggravate her so much some times that it makes the hair on the back of her neck stand up. It is just something that comes natural to us.

More than anything though, I guess I remember my grandfather's face because it had those tired eye bags that resemble used tea bags. I used to call him "Tea man" at one point because of them. He also has one of those faces that make people think he's angry at them. It's kind of spooky to say that because people say that I have that same face when I walk down the hall at school, but I don't think so. I guess I really remember his face because I have always wondered why he wasn't in my life as much. I mean I know that he isn't my father and that he doesn't hold guardianship or responsibility over me, but I still would like to see him there sometimes. I don't know why. I guess I just do because I would like to at least once say that "oh, me and grandpa went to the store to get cold drinks and some chips" or say that "me and grandpa sat on the sofa and watched the Saints game." I want to be able to say that because I feel like if I could, the most I can say is that I have a mutual relationship with my grandfather. I think that may make our relationship a little better because it's a start at building a bond between us. I don't know why building a relationship with him is so important to me, but I do think that I want it because I just had a lack of it in my life. I mean that may explain those moments in my life of why I became curious about things. Why I became curious about my life, my future, and even my adulthood as a possible parent. I thought about it all.

Because of my curiosity about my grandfather, I have come to realize with the help of me asking my dad a million questions that my grandfather's abandonment is nothing new like a fresh pack of gum. I say that because when I asked my dad about his familiar disappearances, he said that it was normal. He said that growing up was hard because grandpa was never there. It was mainly due to him always getting in trouble with the law and being in and out the jail all the time. To my dad, he went to jail so much that he became the America's most "wanted" father. Other than his problems with the law, he never helped out when my father, my four uncles and aunt, and grandmother needed him the most. My dad also said that his father was so much of a non-factor that he became a stranger and disappointment at the same time. What I find crazy about the whole thing, though, is that even though my dad couldn't give a fuck about his own father, he would still try to share a conversation with him if he got the chance today.

Sometimes I get curious, and I wonder if the imperialist history and culture of our country got to my grandpa. I say that because one of the main things that kept my grandpa away from his family was the imperialist jail system. The jail system in New Orleans is so prejudiced and unjust that it literally locks blacks up to take control of us and break us down as people. I mean just look at my grandpa. It would not let him be free, even though nine out of ten he was accused of some worthless crime back in the day that took him away from his family. I feel that they wanted to control him and take him away from his only support system. They wanted to put him in a cage where he would be told what to do and how to act like he was an animal. He was being legally tortured. My grandfather's experience sounds a lot like the policing introduced by Bryan Wagner in *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power After Slavery*. In Wagner's book, he talks about the origin of policing during enslavement and post-enslavement era as way of controlling the black population in the south. From what he wrote, I can tell that my grandpa was an example of the imperialist demonstration.

When I think about it, I think he suffered from self-torture after he got out of jail. I say that because my dad said when he got out, he thought that my grandpa beat and tortured himself for all the years of wrongdoings he did. He said that he would often starve himself because he would think about all the wrong things he did so much that he would forget to eat. My dad said that he felt that my grandpa probably stayed away more once he got out of jail because he couldn't confess to what he had done to his family.

When I really think about it, my grandpa's situation sounds like a couple readings I read in class. For example, after reading writings such as *Catfish and Mandala* by Andrew X. Pham and other readings in my Students At the Center class, I have realized that imperialism is not just overwhelming in dominance, but it's also self torture. I say that because in *Catfish and Mandala*, the narrator, who is on a journey in pursuit of both his adopted homeland and his forsaken fatherland, meets a war veteran who has left his family and everything else behind to live in the Mexican desert. He does this because after years of fighting in an imperialist war, he was turned into a man who lost not just his humanity, but also his personality and will to go on. It was like he lost what he had or was before the war and nothing could bring him back to reality, not even his family. I kind of think that Pham introduced the war veteran as an example of the narrator. I say that because when the narrator was going through his family experience with the imperialist war, he couldn't even go back to his own reality. He just ran away.

Another example of self torture I noticed was when I read George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant." In Orwell's writing, he talks about the time of his duty as an imperial British official in Burma when he had to kill an out-of-control elephant. Now his experience as an imperial officer was crazy because it seems to me that he didn't even want to be an officer, but he did it anyway to show love for his country and to not seem like an outcast. When the incident with the elephant comes up in the writing, the self torture shows. I say that because he really didn't want to kill the elephant, but he had to because that was his job as an officer. He really just wanted to defend himself from becoming another devilish corpse and just keep his power and illusion of powers by showing that he could and would use the gun. I believe that Orwell was going through self torture because he suffered to do what was morally right to him when the entire Burmese community was on his back. I mean no one wants to be forced to do something against his or her will. Mainly because doing something against your moral virtue bothers you every day like it's haunting you. I guess that's why Orwell had so many insecurities leading up to killing the elephant. I think that Orwell's situation is so ironic because it shows how the colonizer becomes colonized.

Today, I can't say for sure whether I want my grandfather in my life or not because even with my understanding of the imperialist history and culture of our country affecting him, I still think about the fact that if he wasn't there for my dad and his siblings, why would he be here for me and my siblings? I mean I do think about the fact that New Orleans jail system had an effect on him, so my curiosity does make me wonder if I should give him a chance, if I should let him make up for what he did to my dad because it wasn't his fault as much as

it was the imperialist culture that is so central to U. S. life and history. I guess I should give him a chance because maybe that would give me the opportunity to sit with him and actually get to know him for who he is and not what my dad says he is.

HOLDING IT DOWN

BY AUSTIN SMITH, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

As I sat and read *Brothers and Keepers* by John Edgar Wideman, the lights flickered on and off, which made it difficult to read the words on the page. I started to think how is the lighting in prisons? If I got pinched and was sent to the shithole, the so called Hell on Earth, would the lighting be any better? So although difficult, I continued to read because I'm curious as to how John and his family dealt with the incarceration of his brother Robby. I mentioned the part about me being in jail because I see it as a possibility in my life. Not as an option, because I mean who would want to go to prison, but still I always wonder. These thoughts come from the life that I live. Though I don't live the worst life ever, some of my actions could lead to possible incarceration. Yet, I still continue to live it because I enjoy my life. My mindset is carefree, and I leave it up to fate. I always say if something is meant to happen, then it will. Reading this book makes me think about if Robby had these thoughts in his mind as well. And if he did, were they before or after he made it up in his mind to commit the crime. Did he ever stop and think about the other people who would be affected by the consequences of his actions?

My brother pops up into my mind as I read further. I often think is he my keeper as I think John tried to be Robby's keeper. My brother Aaron, who is 23, looks out for me and has done much for me throughout my life. But does that mean he will react to Robby's situation the way John did if I were in it? I know my brother cares, but I also know how my brother is. He feels the same way I do about almost everything. He and I are strategic thinkers, but we don't always use it at the right moments. We think about five or six steps ahead before doing something that has an effect on our lives, but like I said we don't always use it at the right moment. When my brother makes wrong decisions and doesn't think ahead, he always manages to get out of them. He'll go to the club with his little lady, dance with another chick, and have both of the women fight. Then he fights with the other woman's boyfriend and comes out with an "I don't care attitude." The whole time he knows in his mind that it happens like that in the club every day.

However, there are other times when he makes the right decisions. Like John, my brother made a plan to get out the ghetto, go to college and become quite successful. He did what he said he would. Aaron did well in school, graduated the top of his class from Norcross in Atlanta, moved back to New Orleans and attended SUNO to get his Bachelor's Degree in Business Management. He's highly employed at a restaurant in the French Quarters and makes good money. He was able to buy his car flat out, get his own crib with no problem, and have extra money to spare. In my mind he knew what had to be done to make sure he lived a comfortable life until he got into his career. So at this point in life, I felt that he thought about the right steps to make to live well.

I, on the other hand, continue to fuck up, even though I know what I should be doing. He's older than I am, so I think in his mind play is over. In my mind I think this is the time to do it because it will all have to change one day. Robby and I are more alike in a few ways. We both want to party and let life come easy to us. We want to live the life of a rock star doing drugs and partying. I'm more than sure that I'm capable of excelling in school, yet I slack and enjoy my chill time whenever I have it. I'm more concerned with smoking like a power plant, having sex with women and sitting on my ass chilling at the crib playing 2K. I alone have to make the right decisions for my life, yet I'll stand in front of a police station, wait for the bus, spark a joint and wave at the

police car pulling up to acknowledge him and make sure he sees me. I'm that obnoxious type of asshole with no regard for 12. The term "Twelve" is used to refer to the police, when you would shout out "12" if you see police coming up on some illegal activity in which you're involved. Anyways I know that being a young African American male in the city of New Orleans subjects me to being an automatic target due to stereotypes of our clothing and hairstyles. Still I would add insult to injury by smoking an illegal substance right at their HQ, knowing they could slam me and put me away for a little minute for just a gram of that gas, just because they wanted to.

That's a part of me not thinking strategically. When I'm with my cousin DC, we ride deep and dirty. Meaning that we have way too many people in the vehicle at the time and there are so many illegal substances and weapons in the whip that could send us all to the clink for a long time. I know this is not the way to live, but these are the people I surround myself with. Just because he's my cousin that doesn't mean that I have to hang with him, but I choose to live this way. Times when I think strategically are when I want something. If I know I want to buy some shoes that will come out in two weeks, then I'll manage my money better. I know I'm going to want to smoke through these next two weeks and that I'll want to go out to eat and go the movies or whatever I want to use my money for. So I'll plot on ways to keep my money intact until the kicks drop. I'll buy a half, which is a half oz of weed, for \$150 and smoke out of it and make money back. This way I will be able to smoke and spend my money more efficiently until the shoes are released. I say all of this to point out that my brother and I are the same in having a carefree mentality. However the point is you know what should be done and what shouldn't.

Now I want to get back to my previous point about my thoughts about prison being a possibility in my life. I only say that because there were a few close calls in my life. There were times when I was cuffed and in the back of the paddy wagon. Every time I got out free and ended getting into the same shit that got me there in the first place with the exception of being caught that time. I can't imagine going to jail for some bullshit, nor can I see my brother, but I don't think the way we live our lives keeps us far from it. My brother and I never talked about our lives in depth to each other, but I now I wonder will a situation like this have to happen for him and me to get closer? There are many memories that we have about times when we were younger and we used to reminisce but now not so much. We are either busy having a good time doing something new or we go our separate ways and do our own thing. It makes me think about when John was waiting for Robby outside the Laramie Lanes while Robby was a fugitive and John started remembering a time they all had spent together when there was never a thought in their minds that this would happen.

This essay was written to display the comparison between ideals of a set people who are brothers. To show the distinction between one set of brothers with consciousness of how they live their lives, me and my own, and the other set, John and Robby. I wanted to make it clear that I am aware of my mistakes in my life decisions in an attempt to figure out why I do what I do. My brother follows in the footsteps of a person who became successful, and I do as well. Like the differences between John and Robby, my brother and I have them as well. Aaron went about it in a different way than I do. As I earlier stated in the essay that jail is a possibility for me because of how I live, I never took time to figure out why I do it! I once heard someone say we never take time to actually think about our lives on a personal level, and I then began think to myself, "What is the main reason for me to live this way?" I had trouble thinking about this—nothing came to mind. No one in my family has had this negative influence on me. As a matter of fact, the only influence I've had in my life was to do my best when it comes to making smart decisions and letting education be my key to success. Yet, I realized I do it just because I love the thrills of living "dangerously." I can't focus both on taking steps to success through education and the party life; it's either one or the other. I figure that this is the time to play around because at some point in life, sooner than I think, all that will have to cease. There will be no room for acting an ass when the serious parts of life come along.

YOU CAN'T TAKE BACK THE HANDS OF TIME!

BY EBONY SCOTT, McDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

I think about prison more than anything, why? I can't answer. I won't answer because, then you'll know, that I know better, and I don't need you judging me. The thoughts of being in prison, trying to keep my sanity alone, kills me. Years without my family, not being able to do the things I want to, would drive me insane. It would be my fault that I missed out on half of their life, all because I couldn't do it the right way. Sometimes taking the easy way out is believed to be less stressful and more beneficial.

"I'm sorry I missed out on y'all life. I made a stupid decision," my daddy said to us. He had three children at the time. I met my daddy at seven years old. Truth is momma didn't want him to be my father, so she kept me away from him. A month after meeting him, he left me for prison. I wasn't affected as much because I hardly knew him. In the year of 2002, my father and a couple of his friends schemed to rob an armored truck full of money in Houma, LA. Twenty minutes after capturing the money, the police arrested them in rush hour traffic. They sent him away for ten years, but he only did five.

"I was trying to get money. Daddy was trying to feed y'all," he said to me. I understood his reasoning, but it was by far the dumbest decision he could have ever made, and he admitted it. Trying to feed us in the way that he had thought was easier only made him miss out on more of my life. From the ages 1 through 12, I grew up without a father. Most of my years, I always wondered what it would be like to have a father involved in my life. Will I love him as much as I love my momma? Can I call him daddy without the feeling of awkwardness? In 2007, at the age of 12, these questions were answered.

I met my daddy again for the second time. It felt as if I never met him before. I was much older. Every weekend my other siblings and I would spend time with him, catching up on lost time. There would be times we would play, but I always felt left out. I can remember it like it was yesterday. My dad was play fighting with my sister, and I stood aside and watched, even though I wanted to play along. I would sit aside and hide the fact that I wasn't shy, but deep down inside I really wanted to play. I loved my daddy so much, but I was too stubborn to show it. I guess I was happy to finally experience a father in my life. Even though I was happy, I was still sad. I was very mature at twelve years old, making me believe that I was too old, and that it was too late to do things he could have done, back when I was seven.

I can't imagine being in my father's shoes. If I was a father, not being able to get back the years that were missed would drive me insane. Imagining to hear my own story from my daughter is heart breaking. Prison was hard enough trying to keep sanity. Now you're released and going insane. "I'm sorry, and I wish that I could take back the hands of time," he would say to me.

"CAN I SPEAK TO SHUGGIE"

BY JANELL EASTERLING, ELEANOR MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

I remember being young spending numerous hours with a boy whom I loved with all my heart. I miss his dark skin, slim physique and humor that made me tickled pink with laughter. Most of all, I miss his deep baritone that I would hear often on Sundays when he called and asked, "Can I speak to Shuggie?" Those calls stopped coming a long time ago. Maybe because calling from beyond the steel bars doesn't top face-to-face conversations. Maybe because accepting collect calls from OPP is over-rated, or over-priced rather.

What happened to that smart, sweet kid?

He would disappear while his sister, my sister and I were in their kitchen making hot pockets. I would run to the window in search of him, only to catch a glimpse of the back of him walking away with a group of boys I'd never seen before. When he came back, he smelled of an odor that I hadn't yet encountered. The next day he went outside with that same group of guys. Yet on this day, his sister, her friends, my sister and I followed behind. I couldn't understand his sister's need to go put on tight shorts, a crop top and comb her hair from out of a perfect wrap; also to stunt with her new phone and walk with this weird twist. Being older than I was, boys to them were like new Barbie dolls to me, intriguing and time consuming. I thought we'd go to the swing set like usual, and we did but not for long. They eased to the group of boys, two by two, until my sister and I were left looking on. That is until she left too. I sat on the swing, lonely, just dragging my feet in the sand. My fear overpowered my curiosity to figure out what the laughter and smirks were all about. I sat there until the sun started to go down, which made more people come out of their apartments. I'm not good with people I don't know, so I walked towards the group. My head told me to just go inside, but my feet walked closer to them. Upon reaching them, I heard every "nigga," every "fuck" and every "bitch" in the book. To my surprise, it was my normally gentle and goofy cousin. I didn't want to stay and continue to get my feelings hurt, yet I stood there. Standing there, I witnessed the boys push the girls around and touch them in places I had yet to learn about. Everything I knew him as, wasn't what I saw.

My entire perception of him changed after witnessing that. I was afraid of my own cousin. When he would walk into the house, I would run to his mother. "What's wrong with you Nelly Nell?" she would ask. "Your son makes me tremble in fear," I wanted to say, but "nothing" always came out.

My aunt would cry so much, I swear you could see the tracks of her tears. Being as young as I was, what consoling could I do? Her baby boy was on the wrong path. He had lost almost all of the respectfulness she spent years teaching him. "Ryan, I'm tired of fighting you. You 13 years old and want to be a man. I'm the only adult in here!" she told him one day before putting him out. It didn't last long though. "Ma, I'm sorry!" he yelled through the door a few days later. She ran to the door, embraced him and apologized as if she was the one who did something wrong.

Violence is poisonous, and my cousin was bitten by the sick animals who were host to the toxin. "Ryan was arrested for possession of marijuana." "Ryan was arrested for having a gun." "Ryan was arrested for attempted armed robbery on school campus." Each offense seemed to get even worse than the last. I never could quite grip the crimes he'd been accused of because even with his new persona, he couldn't possibly have committed any of those. They didn't stop there either. One afternoon in July of 2011, I walked past my mom's door. "Is that Ryan?" I overheard her yell. I ran to see if who she saw on television was in fact my cousin. My heart dropped with my mouth to see him on the news being arrested for second-degree murder and attempted second-degree murder, of all crimes. I quietly walked back to my room and just shook my head until I became dizzy from the constant motion. I couldn't help but hear my mom on the phone with her younger sister getting all the "tea" about how and when it happened. I didn't care about the how, the what, the when or the who. What I cared mostly about was the why. Why on earth he would want to end two people's lives being that someone took his father's?

I didn't visit while he was in jail, I didn't attend the trial, I didn't go with the rest of the family to the prison to take pictures with him on Thanksgiving. I'm sorry that I preferred not talking to him with a piece of glass dividing us. I'm sorry that I didn't think I could bear hearing his punishment. I'm sorry that I didn't want to spend my Turkey day with prisoners.

I thought about how much he'd changed since I was a little girl. Then I came to the conclusion it wasn't a change at all. It was more like a swap. Ryan's "thuggish" side came to the forefront when he arrived at the

realization that the streets don't respect a sweet guy. What he failed to process, though, is that the streets already had enough guys calling it home, and he was just another small part of its long story.

Before he was arrested, I managed to get to his house. I was greeted with a hug that seemed as if God himself had personally spent years making, a "Say Janell, let me borrow five dollars" and a smile that had been hidden for what felt like centuries. This was no monster, no thug, no murderer. This was my cousin Ryan. A dark-skinned guy with a slim physique and humor that made me tickled pink with laughter. The one with the deep baritone voice that I would hear on Sunday's when he called asking "Can I speak to Shuggie?"

FAMILY CURSE

BY KIANITA ALMORE, MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

"Why we only have five boys at this party, grandma?" I asked a table full of old people. That was my first mistake. So I quickly tried to change the subject. Of course my grandmother knew what I was doing, and she changed it right back and said, "you not getting off that easy." I sat down before she told me to, cause I knew some long lecture was coming, and I just knew to sit down and get ready for it.

She said, "Now Baby kee, why you care if there's boys here or not? None of them gon' won't you anyway."

She laughed, but I didn't find it funny, so I just asked again, "Where are all the boys? There no men, nothing. All I see is girls. Why is that? Why won't you tell me?"

I could tell it was something she really didn't want to talk about, but I didn't care because I wanted to know. Grandma said, "it's not in your best interest right now, kee. You too young." I guess I had a look on my face when she said, "you too young," cause a family friend said, "She old enough to know. If she pointed it out, tell her Gloria. This family never wanna say anything to these children. If she wanna know, just tell her." I just knew my grandma was going to tell me, so I got closer and prepared myself.

"Baby girl, this family cursed. You may not understand it now, but one day you will. Look around kee. What do you see?"

I answered saying, "a lot of girl cousins."

My grandmother replied, "for the most part our family is girls, but don't think that there were no men cause if that's the case, we wouldn't be here. But as you can see they're not here."

"Where are they?" I interrupted her.

She kinda got a little mad, and I knew right there it was time to shut up and just listen. There was a long pause, and she said, "I'm trying to tell you, they dead baby girl, in jail too. All our baby boys in jail or in the ground dead. It's pitiful to me. It's really sad that all our good black men are in jail or dead. It's not that us women don't do our job right, it's just that this generation, they hard headed, think they know what's right. But they was wrong cause look where they at now. It brings tears to my eyes seeing my young grandboys act like thugs. I hate to say it, but they gone end up like the older ones. We have five baby boys in this family left, and about four young men. I know you and your mom just moved back down here, but let me tell you, it was not always this way, and your mother can testify."

I sat in amazement because I didn't really know what was going on, but she was right. The last thing my grandmother said was, "Kee baby, I'm tired and I mean tired. I'm going to die soon and I'm ready to go and I just

don't want my baby boys to go with me. Baby girl, this family is cursed. You may not understand it now, but one day you will."

My grandmother reminds me of Baby Suggs in *Beloved*. You see, Baby Suggs had a relationship with her grandsons, and when they left, she was really hurt and because of the heartbreak it caused Baby Suggs to die. And just like Baby Suggs, my grandmother was hurt, and she soon died as well as the boys in our family.

I was about seven when she told me this story, which shocks me because I have short-term memory problems. I remember this conversation, because it meant something to me. It was actually the very last conversation that we had. It hurts just thinking about it, but I know she in a better place, and I know she is watching me, guiding me on this journey.

My grandmother never did lie to me. Whatever she told me I believed, because whatever she spoke, it did come to pass. She told me this when she was 72. She died two years later, and the boys did too. I don't really know how many actually died or how many are in jail. But what I do know is that it was a lot because when I look at pictures of the family, I don't know these people, never seen these people. My mom tells me about them and says, "they're family. They got caught up, wrong place at the wrong time." Jail wasn't on their mind anymore; death was. No one cared if one of them went to jail, but "all hell broke loose" when they died.

I wanted to learn what really happened to my family, but I thought maybe it might be too painful because it's family. My cousins were killed by gun shots, caught in the line of fire—in jail because they wanna sell drugs. I believe my grandmother turns in her grave every night because her baby boys proved her right. "This family is cursed" never made sense to me. What did my grandma mean when she said that? If all of this is true, then who put a curse on the Holmes and Haywood family? The fact that for so long I never quite understood what was happening, I just knew I was in the midst of it. When I think about it, I believe this family is cursed. Not cursed meaning like someone putting a spell on the family, but cursed meaning like our males always find themselves into trouble. I think it's because of the people they surround themselves with. They never were good at picking the right set of friends. Or maybe it's the environment, the places they lived. It become who they were. The curse could be the people or the things that they surround themselves with. All I know is whatever is going on in this family, I don't wanna be part of it, and if I do have a son or two, I don't want them to be like their cousins and uncles or "cursed."

When I began to write this essay, I started to ask myself, why do men feel the need to leave and why do women accept it but aren't happy with their decision. You see, I never had any type of male figure in my life. I would say a father figure, but you see that's nothing new. With all these thoughts in my head, I wondered why this was occurring. In society they portray men as head of the household. See where I come from it's the women playing mother and father. Women learned that it's okay for the males to walk out and do their own thing. I believe that men feel they sacrifice a lot when they have to give up their life to hold the house down. It's as if they get scared and just quit. But you see us women always was the stronger species, and I don't care what anybody says. Women give up their lives too, just like men, and women do it without complaining, and they also do it without a handout or any type of help. In my family all the women are independent, so watching them take care of the house it makes me aware that one day I'm going to possibly be put in the same decision.

I'm not afraid to handle this situation only because I watched the women in my family do it, and I feel like if they could do it, then I can too. I understand that it will be hard, but at the same time it has to be done because it seems like there won't be a man, man enough to take on the job the same way I would be able to. James Baldwin says, "you are really of another era, part of what happened when the Negro left the land and came into what the late E. Franklin Frazier called 'the cities of destruction.' You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger."

I believe that black males don't understand what they have. Don't get me wrong. I'm not downing the black male society, but I think they don't understand that generations before them worked hard day and night and the fact that not only the males in my family but males in general don't feel like they need to work or do anything in life. They want a handout, and they expect someone to give it to them. Young black males look for a quick come up, which gets them caught up. I wonder if males would get themselves together and get their minds together because they're cursed in the society.

It's a cycle that starts with the males in my family but soon ends with me on my own.

AFTER READING JAMES BALDWIN'S "MY DUNGEON SHOOK" BY KIANITA ALMORE, MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Dear cousin Dra,

Cousin Dra, I haven't really talked to you nor really seen you, so bear with me while you read this letter. You see, I can't even imagine how you may feel being locked up in jail while your family is out in the world living it up. I wonder if you ever sat and thought about that. If you haven't, then maybe you should. I think you have enough time.

As I write this letter I wonder what you look like because I haven't seen you all that much. Are you tough and all macho like the jail birds I see on t.v? Are you so depressed that no one can stand to talk to you let alone be around you? Please tell me you aren't a punk, vulnerable, or maybe ignorant to the fact that one day with just a little faith, in due time you will be able to see the light of day because miracles are bound to happen. Are you the moody inmate that be in his feelings all the time but gets around the tough men and puts on this aggressive attitude? Then again you may be the guy that's so sweet and just got caught up in this thing called life.

I may be young, but I know a few things about this here life. I see life being a bad female, and when I say bad I mean she nice with it. That's the new slang I was telling you about. Or maybe life is that friend that's gone stick around. Either they gone ride with you till the day you die or they will be the one to leave you for dead. You see, life could be your best friend and on the other hand could be the worst thing in the world. But one thing for sure, when it's all said and done you can walk away and say, "At least I learned something from this."

Once you get caught up, it's almost impossible to get out. I don't have to tell you much about that because you sitting in jail with a life sentence all cause life took control of your life. You not a bad person, and don't think you are. I believe you took the easy way out, looked for that quick hustle, something just to be put on the same level as the next man. No one can fault you for the decisions you made, because you are paying for them right now but not only is that the case but when you were growing up all you probably saw was everyone getting a hustle, so that's all you know.

Not much has changed since you were a youngun' because you see, this generation is about the same. These boys don't wanna work, they don't wanna get their education, they just looking for a handout and the only way to come up is to slang drugs and be the hottest dope boy on the block.

Being in high school I have learned a lot. I have learned to think for myself, and with saying that I know that society has made my mindset so screwed up to a point where it's kinda hard to have your own opinion. Let me explain what I mean when I say that. So I take this class called English AP Bard. It's a college class through Students at the Center, and let me tell it's not a cake walk, but that's not the point. In this class we talk about everything, and I do mean everything. Have you ever wondered why the sky is blue, or why we celebrate Christopher Columbus for finding the new world when he just wanted money or maybe why we only talk about

M.L.K. and Rosa Parks being the most influential people in the civil rights movement when there were so many more who were involved? We think about things that people my age know nothing about, and I find it weird to have a mindset where I know that the United States is more screwed up in the head than me and you. With that being said, we were brought to the world in chains, and I guess that's exactly how they want us to leave. Because nobody in this society is trying to help us out. Never in civil rights days have you seen blacks looking for a handout, so when did it have such a major transition? Blacks used to wake up early every morning to get their jobs done. Now you can barely get us up for the 6:30 bus for school. What does that tell you? Does that say we are lazy? Not only are we lazy, we want someone to wake us up and tell us everything that needs to be done next.

We never had anything given to us on a silver platter for generations and generations, so since when was it okay for us to think that the world was gone be nice and give us a chance since we have a black president in office? Society don't care about us. It never did.

Keep your head up,

Kianta

MY SOCIETY SHOOK: LETTER TO MY NEPHEW BY KIERRA WILSON, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

Dear Teddie Baby

I know as you grow up and soon will read this, you will hate that I call you teddie baby and while doing it pull on your cheeks. Right now while you are young, enjoy your child life. For when you get into your adolescent life, it is a devious peer pressure world in which your friends convince you to smoke, drink and maybe eventually try to get you to break in houses with them or sell drugs. I would hate to see you do these things, for they only lead to flashing lights and click clack sounds. I wouldn't like to see you follow the path of your father in and out of jail for petty charges. But even though they are petty charges, they are still wrong to do .

I wish for you to grow up to not let this criminal system keep you down and for you to know that you can make something of your life. Everything is possible. You can be what you want. I'm not saying it is an easy road: it is cracked and unlevelled with pot holes, but when you make it through all the dips and bumps, it will be all worth it. You will have set backs, and I pray they all are for major comebacks. You will have many challenges like police that might don't like you or the way you look from what you wear or the color of your skin. There is still racism, when people don't like you cause of the color of your skin, and even though I wish there wasn't, it is still present. As you grow up you will notice that I have never truly patronized you or sugar coated anything. When you do wrong like curse and hit me, you always receive a pop on the hand or mouth.

This world is not perfect, and you will face challenges as you grow older. For it has boys who are teenagers who get gunned down for walking down a street because they look suspicious. I hate for you to meet the stereotype that because you are a black boy that you are automatically up to trouble. This is the way of our U. S. society, so stay out of harm's way. I want you to live to see another day and not just to live but to live in the world where we are told we are free so not in a jail cell. I love you very much, and even though I am writing you advice, you can always come up to me like you do now hitting me and asking me questions, but when you do ask questions this time, I hope to understand you.

Love Your Aunt Kierra

THOUGHTS OF GOING TO JAIL

BY MYJAH HARRISON, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

The thought of being imprisoned is something that really frightens me. I can't imagine spending a long period of time not being able to do what I want to do. But what scares me the most is being imprisoned for a crime I didn't commit. I don't know how I would be able get through the time with thoughts of me being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I never really thought about going to jail until reading John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers* and also being presented with a story about Jerome Morgan.

Last year when I started Mr. Randels' Students at the Center class for Bard Early College, he brought up a story about a man being jailed since he was seventeen years old for a crime he didn't commit. Me being the child that I am I couldn't believe that someone could actually be imprisoned for something they didn't do. I questioned how did Mr. Randels know that Jerome was innocent? This year my question was answered when Jerome sat in our class. When he told us his story, it made me see how messed up our justice system is. I didn't understand how they can just ruin someone's life just so they can have a closed case. After hearing what Jerome had to say, Mr. Randels made me aware that my mom and dad, whom he also taught at McDonogh 35 High School, are around the same age as Jerome.

Hearing what happened made me eager to find out more. When my mom got home from work, I asked her did she know a man named Jerome who went to jail from being accused of killing someone at a sweet sixteen. Soon as I asked the question she said, "Oh that man didn't kill anyone. I could've told you that!" This made me want to know more, so I asked how she knew. My mom told me that the real killer went to McDonogh # 35 with her and that he was friends with my father. With knowing this I questioned how can my father be friends with someone who took another life? Did my father know that his friend committed the crime? Was he involved in this crime? These thoughts overwhelmed me in a sense because if I knew that my dad could be involved in this, it would make me look at him in a different way. My mom enlightened me by answering these questions. The thing that really got to me was when she told me that the people testifying against Jerome knew that he didn't do it. The thought of them being so afraid of the person who did it scared them enough to watch an innocent person go to jail.

I felt so sorry that I put myself in his shoes because at the time of him telling the story, I was the same age. I wonder how he did it. How did he live with the thought of people seeing him as a killer. It made me see my wanting to grow up so soon and wanting to be considered an adult differently. He made me realize that his childhood was taken away from him. I barely knew him, and it felt like I connected with him in a way. It makes me want to make a change and do something about these kind of things. I know that Jerome is not the only person who was imprisoned behind being falsely accused. So this leaves me with the question should we fight for what's right or continue letting innocent people go to jail?

UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN

BY RAVEN WALLACE, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

Growing up we never had the best relationship as brother and sister. Many times we would fight for no apparent reason and actually grew this hatred for one another. Within the past few years we have had the strongest relationship we ever had. I'm glad to say that you are actually my best friend.

You were already three years into life when our parents brought me home for the very first time. As young kids, between the ages of birth to about six years old, we were very close as brother and sister. We even had our own nicknames: Beedy (me) and DeeDee (you). As time went on, we slowly grew apart. I can remember back to the age of seven when it all started. We were always arguing about the smallest things. One of the main things we would argue about was who was watching the TV first. "That's what siblings do," is what everyone would say. No one thought it would get really bad in just a few years.

By the time I was 10, you were 13, and we were already fighting physically. Some days we were cool and not fighting, but other days we would try to kill one another. The stress from our parents' divorce didn't make it any better. I was about 14, and you were 17. I remember we got into a real heated argument which led into a physical confrontation. This was our last fight.

A few days after this incident, we sat down and had a very strong heart-to-heart conversation. What we came to realize is, in this world we are all we have. No matter what goes on, in the end no one will have our back like we have each other. I was surprised when you asked me to be the God-Mother of your daughter. I knew then, this was only the beginning to a long-lasting friendship.

During the past few years, we gained a really good relationship. We were still arguing from time to time, but hey isn't that what siblings do? Between the ages of 14 and 15 (you were 17 and 18), we were like two peas in a pod. We talked about everything, and we laughed and cried together.

When your daughter was born, it seemed like the happiest day of your life. You talked about how beautiful she was and how much you were going to be a good father to her. I remember waking up early on Saturday mornings just to go catch the bus so you could spend the day with your little princess. These days were like our little miniature bonding trips. What I miss most is laughing at our favorite cartoons together. People just don't understand how fun it was to watch *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* on Boomerang and *Gravity Falls* on Disney Channel. These times are irreplaceable.

I was still 15 when you were arrested. You were just making 19. Now, I'm 16 and feel like I'm at war with the judicial system for your rights. I just can't stop thinking of the day you were taken away from freedom. I remember it was an early Tuesday morning. The police were banging on the door like they were trying to knock it down. When they said they were looking for you, I knew immediately something bad was happening, but never did I guess murder was involved. I actually didn't believe when they said you were wanted for a murder charge. Despite all of the wrong things you were doing, I knew with every piece of confidence in me, they had the wrong person. I know for a fact my brother isn't the type to kill anyone.

We, mama and I, were on the phone every day trying to make sure everything was ok with you. We were getting really sick of people giving us the run around. Everyone we talked to had a different story. "Will he be getting out? How much time will he serve? How much is his bail?" Eventually we got what we were looking for. All of our questions were answered, though they weren't the answers we wanted. No one knew if you would get out soon, and the worst part was finding out you could serve life in prison. With three or four charges on you, bail was \$500,000. Way too much for our pockets. At this point we were very desperate to find ways to help you out.

It kills me to have to write letters to you and wait weeks to get a letter back. I shouldn't have to wait to talk to my own brother. I started crying and had to stop reading the first time I received a letter from you. I can remember you telling me, "Ravie, I love you and stay in your books; I know you will make something out of yourself." This broke me down even more, because I wish you could've done the same.

When the first episode of *The First 48* aired, I was really shocked to see your face. I wasn't expecting to see you on a TV show that's based on investigating a murder. It hurt me so much to see my brother, who so recently became my best friend, on national television for this crime.

During the process of filling out paper work for visitation, we were interrupted by this tragic ordeal. Without any transportation or funds to travel, we weren't able to visit you in St. Charles Parish. When you were in O.P.P. (Orleans Parish Prison), it was easy to catch the bus and come visit, but unfortunately, thanks to *The First 48* and Orleans Parish Sheriff Department, you were being threatened and, for the sake of your life, removed from that prison.

I just can't digest the feeling of not being able to see, hear or speak to you. Even though it hurts to not be able to talk to someone I love and miss so dearly, I know you're only gone temporarily. I pray every day for your health and wellness. I thank God that you're only in jail and not in the grave.

After six long months of not being able to see, hear nor speak to you, one of our prayers was finally answered. Now that we have a car, we are able to come visit you in jail. I was disappointed that we couldn't get a contact visit, but just to be able to see your face was good enough for me. It felt good to see you laughing and smiling. I'm happy that I didn't cry. Promises have been made to visit you every other Tuesday, and they won't be broken. I will continue to write you every week to show my love and support. I promise to pray for you every day until we meet again.

INNOCENT

BY TOI SMITH, ELEANOR MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Growing up I was always the baby. My whole family had me spoiled. Both sides of my family treated me like the queen. Often my uncle would give me gifts. His were the most expensive and biggest. I now realize and have begun to wonder how was he able to afford this when he didn't even have a job at the time?

I was still a toddler when my uncle was incarcerated. As the years went by I knew I had an uncle, but I just had this assumption that he was on a vacation as my mom would tell me. No one had told me the crime he committed until he was released a week before my 15th birthday. I had known and heard of him my whole life. We would visit and he would call often. Sometimes I would ask why he was incarcerated, but my mom would brush it off as "it's his story to tell you not mines."

Stephen Young, inmate number 101127, is all we would hear when visiting him. This call is up in five minutes is all I would hear when talking to him on the phone. It's like everything he did was monitored, and he was under 24/7 surveillance. This reminds of Robby in John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers And Keepers*. He was on the run and very paranoid. He was feeling as though he was always being watched, looking over his shoulder.

I wonder often how can someone who had sold drugs get more time than someone who murdered others. My uncle had been in jail most of my life—15 years to be exact, yet he had only been caught with little drugs. While this other man had murdered someone and only received six years. How can this be? Are people more worried about drugs rather than being worried about murders?

In the book *Brothers And Keepers*, John Edgar Wideman describes his last days with actually being with his brother. They didn't have much of a relationship prior to Robby going to jail, yet he still had his door open for him. This is how it was with me. Even though I was younger when my uncle was incarcerated, I still took the time to get to know him. We would visit him every chance we got, and that helped us build a very strong relationship. I often wonder would we be closer if he hadn't been in jail.

I think Robby going to jail actually brought him and his brother closer. It made them realize that life is short and people make mistakes. I just wish some people would understand that most people in jail didn't even commit the crime they're being sentenced to—and that as Michelle Alexander shows in *The New Jim Crow*, our drug and sentencing policies need a drastic change.

POLICE, RACE, AND COMMERCE IN THE U.S.

BY KERVION DOYLE, ELEANOR MCMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

When the letter k is placed together three times consecutively, the first image that comes to most people's mind is racist white men covered in white sheets running around like wild animals killing thousands of African Americans during the 19th and 20th centuries. We know these memorable men as the Ku Klux Klan. These men were known for their scare tactics against anyone who was not like them, anyone who threatened the white supremacy in America. After the civil rights movement, many believed that the Klan had ended and no longer existed, but that belief is far from right. They are still here to this day living among us. No they are not covered in white sheets anymore but in uniforms that show some type of authority. No they do not run around on horses during the night hour terrorizing towns, but they now ride in noisy cars with flashing red and blue lights and are considered valued men of the community.

Before the 1880s there was no traditional or modern law enforcement in the United States. But in the South during the 1800s rich white citizens were considered the police. This included political figures, business owners, especially slave owners. There was no law, only violence between individuals. They made their own rules. The first form of a type of police department was so-called slave patrols. They regulated the laws of where slaves could be, when they could be there, and what they could do to whom while they were there. They had laws that protected slaves from cruelty, but it was not enforced unless in high profile cases. This was not to conserve and recognize the humanity of enslaved Africans but rather to protect their property (commerce). Although regulating slave trade was one of their responsibilities, capturing fugitives was the primary duty. In his book *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power After Slavery*, (Harvard University Press, 2009) Bryan Wagner an associate professor at University of California at Berkeley in the chapter entitled "The Strange Career of Bras-Coupé" states that the only reason for the creation of the police was the restraint of urban slave populations.

The modern police was supposedly adopted from the London Metropolitan Police. If it was adopted from London's police force, why do our police carry weapons such as guns? The first police homicide in the South was in 1830. Because of this, the campaign to take away police's heavy weaponry intensified. After six years an ordinance removed police weaponry except for their spontoons.

The primary duties of the police from the beginning can tell us much of our modern day police. Michel Foucault, the influential French philosopher/scholar who wrote *Discipline and Punish* and many other books on the archaeology of human knowledge and society says in "Space, Knowledge and Power" that "... During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there appeared—rather quickly in the case of commerce and more slowly in all the other domains—this idea of a police that would manage to penetrate, to stimulate, to regulate, and to render almost automatic all the mechanisms of society." The main objective for police from the start was to protect the commerce of society and restrain slave populations. Are these the same today? I think so. You can look at the recently famous murder of Trayvon Martin for example. His murderer, George Zimmerman, thought Martin was a threat to his and others' property in the neighborhood, so he decided to protect it by murdering young innocent Trayvon. Today they aren't exactly restraining the slaves but African Americans and other minorities. The main goal of the Ku Klux Klan was the reestablishment of white supremacy throughout the United States. Wouldn't you say the restraint of slaves would be the same as the establishment of white supremacy?

DEAR PAPI

BY TIA GRIFFIN, ELEANOR MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Note: When I met my Papi—me as a little girl and he as a free man—he had already served about 10 years of prison time.

Dear Papi,

My first memory of you is when you and my mama were on my grandma's porch. You guys were laughing so loud that I heard you through the front bedroom window. I decided to sneak my head out of the gated door, and I saw you picking her up and putting her in the back of your Dodge truck. I don't know how you did it because you know that Taya is a big woman. You guys were perfect together in my eyes, even when I would hear her on the phone cursing you out and looking at me saying, "I'm so done with his ass!" It made her mad when I laughed at her because we knew that was a lie. It sucked that I didn't see you as much, since you know my mom moved around a lot. I don't know why she moved to Atlanta. My brothers said it was to follow you, and a part of me thought it was true.

Do you remember in 2009 when my grandmother was in that car accident and it scared my mama straight? When we moved back to New Orleans in one week, it was so stressful man. Then in that same year, it seemed like nothing was getting better.

A few months after that my mom told me you had been diagnosed with prostate cancer. It really didn't hit me until my mom read a text from you that said, "It's spread to my lungs and they can't do surgery." I remember running to my room crying. I hated that you had cancer, and I hated thinking about it.

When I began my new school in 8th grade at McMMain, I was going crazy! Grades dropping, all into mess, disrespecting teachers, and life was horrible. My mom insisted that I go ahead and talk to the social worker. Like any other kid, I didn't want to go. I was thinking she thought I was crazy! But it turned out to be just what I needed. My first day visiting Mr. D's office, I cried for literally 30 minutes. Mr. D. assured me that everything was going to be alright, since he had also battled cancer and came out beating it. My hopes were high again, and I thought everything was all good.

For my 10th grade year at McMMain, you had come to town to visit your mom across the canal. You talked to me about my grades, and you told me I had to get it together unless I wanted Taya all on my back. Then we decided to stop at the corner store and give you a treat you had been craving, a good ole hot sausage po-boy, even though you wasn't supposed to eat it. Man did you tear it up, along with that pineapple Big Shot! I would've never guessed that would be my last memory of you.

About a month after that, I remember leaving school and getting on the bus. The sky was darker than usual. The world seemed still. I had gotten sad all of a sudden and didn't know why. When I got home, I was greeted by my grandma and brother. My mother was on the telephone, and at that point I didn't want to be bothered. My mom had asked to talk to me, and I told my brother to tell her I didn't feel like talking. I guess my brother felt like he had to be the one to break it to me, since I didn't want to talk. But he put the phone on speaker, and my mother said, "Tia, Wayne died this morning." It literally felt like my soul had left my body. I cried and cried until my pillow was filled with tears and Sephora mascara.

The next week my mom and I went to view the body at the church, and I looked down at him and said, "He's smiling." I then felt reassured that he would always have my back, even if he isn't here physically.

He and my brother would always play fight, and my brother would always brag about how he knocked a boy's teeth out, and Wayne would say, "But where ya battle wounds at? Where ya battle wounds at?" Even though Wayne won those many street battles growing up, he was defeated by his worst enemy, cancer.

Papi, you don't even realize what kind of impact you had on my life. You treated my mom like a queen. I would always look online for dresses I would wear to the wedding. You didn't just have a bond with me, but with all of my mom's kids. Just because you weren't my biological father, blood couldn't make us closer. I'm glad you came in and knocked some sense into me when I was young and acting out. You showed me that I should have respect for myself, focus on my education, and don't fall for the sweet talk and saggy pants! And now I'm in this Students at the Center class where I'm getting the opportunity to write you, and school is going great. My grades are right, and I'm having fun. Don't be upset that I have a boyfriend, Papi! He's a good boy and treats me well. Daddy, now I don't settle for anything less than what I saw in you. I would like to be treated like a queen like you treated big Taya, but I hear you always telling me, "You gotta be a princess first."

DREAD-LOCKED

BY VONDERRICK TAYLOR, ELEANOR MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

If there are over 100 people in one area in New Orleans East, and most of them look as though they are the same race, and none of the people in the area are doing any injustices such as speeding or J-walking, not even car crashes are occurring, then why in the non-living name of Elijah did my brother get pulled over by the New Orleans Police Force out of anyone else? Oh, did I forget to mention that my brother is also an African American male who, at the time of the traffic stop, had dreadlocks?

Now I know we all know the statistics for Black men, especially with dreadlocks. Usually it is the white man who dwells on the fact that society does not allow a black man with such hair style to drive a nice car without it being stolen. I do not know whether the man who stopped my brother was black or white, but I do know he stopped him because of his hair and probably even his skin color. My brother is an auto mechanic; he gets broken down cars shipped to his shop, fixes them up and sells them. Sometimes these cars are exotic or they are just very nice, very expensive cars. My brother also loves to have an expensive car, which is why he bought one for himself. Now, I understand not everyone is a saint and not everyone will respect others' property and not steal. But does that really give the police the right to stop a black man with long hair who is behind the wheel of a really superior car?

"Pluralistic Ignorance," written by Ariana Newman, is an example of how society once again can view a black man even without the hair and without knowing him. Ariana's brother, Gordon Anthony Newman, Junior, was incarcerated because of a crime he did not commit. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time and was pinned for two murders that he was the eyewitness of.

Now, my brother's situation is nothing compared to one such as hers, especially when it reached to a sentence of life at Angola State Prison. But still how much of a chance did Gordon have in court to be free, when he was a black African American male? Another example of such situations in which the color and appearance of a person caused a major change in whether a person was guilty or not is the story of Jerome Morgan, another black male who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jerome was a witness of his friend being shot and killed. Instead of running like everyone else, Jerome chose to go toward a random person and try to save his life. Because of this Jerome was sentenced to Angola also where he served over 20 years. He has been set free from the prison but still faces the hardship of society doing him wrong, to say that he is under house arrest. These men and many more, and for those I know who are innocent men, I would hope they get the justice they

deserve. But with society already having an opinion on each and every black man in this Country, how many more people have to be wrongly convicted before they understand?

My brother was put in a situation that could have gone extremely wrong, but he knowing what society had pin pointed on him, he kept his cool and spoke wisely. My brother is close to bald now. About two years ago he cut off all of his dreads. Yes, he does look older, more mature, and like a well-groomed adult, but I know my brother wouldn't throw away something he really cared about just to throw it away. He put too much time and energy into it, but as he explained to me, to not give "them" a reason to stop you. He had too much to work for, especially his new born baby girl at the time. He did what was best to keep his family safe, and if that meant cutting off of his prized possessions, then that's exactly what he did. I would say that since that, I never heard of my brother getting pulled over because of his hair again. Maybe because he was speeding or doing something stupid, but he never was asked the question, "is this your car," again.

UNCLE CARL

BY KERVION DOYLE, ELEANOR MCMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

"This is a call from a federal prison." He and I both ignored the rude lady interrupting our call. He continued telling me all his plans for when he gets out. 2021 is a long damn time away if you ask me. But he talks about it as if it's right around the corner. My uncle was sentenced to eight years for a crime he did commit. Before jail my uneducated, unmotivated uncle only knew the inside of a vodka bottle and the barrel of a gun. He was on the road to death or jail. I'm glad it ended in jail. I can remember my mother telling me that he was the most troubled child out of the three of them. Even at the time of his birth, he nearly killed my grandmother.

My uncle was in and out of jail his entire teenage life, and my mother being the little big sister she was, always got him out. But today she doesn't even answer his calls. She says she's tired of being the savior. After our phone calls, I feel there is a different man on the other end of the phone. Someone I never heard before, someone with a plan. I'm the only one willing to listen to his plans because no else believes in him.

He always wanted better for me, even though before he didn't want better for his self. Through the phone calls we had I see well the change in my lost uncle. Thoughts of opening his own business and helping troubled youth are all he fills our minutes with. I always tell him I'm just 16. How on earth could I help with these endeavors? But he continues to say, "Baby you all I got." I tell my mama about his plan, but she really ignores me.

My sister Ariana Newman, former member of the same Students at the Center class I am in now and writer of "Pluralistic Ignorance," an essay we are studying in our Bard College dual enrollment class, talks about how jail has shaped her brother, another one of my family members, to be a help to society. I feel the same now about our uncle. His change in attitude has made me believe that time isolated has made him better. Now I have to take the responsibility of the savior. But I don't blame my mother. Who would listen to a man who sold drugs out his grandmother's house? I guess I'll be the one.

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND INCARCERATION FUTURES

BY AMARA SKINNER, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

I have always thought that the way children are disciplined today is wrong. Boys are left to take care of themselves so they can "learn to be a man"; girls are to raise their younger siblings on their own to "learn how a household is supposed to be." This is not discipline or preparing the young for their future ahead; this is mental

abuse. Speaking of abuse, adults use physical abuse to discipline kids so that “they know not to do what they did wrong the next time.” These methods of discipline are unethical.

At home, I was taught to do simple things such as respect authority. As a young kid, being “disciplined” was a scary thing. Although I personally was never beaten, I had a fear of being hit. There was a growing fear every time I was given a stern look as I began to do something wrong. But, it shouldn’t be that way. Putting fear in children’s minds does nothing but make them want to go around rules to continue doing what they do. This mental abuse turns children into mind twisting, lying, sneaky machines.

The overall role and goal of discipline is to teach a child what’s right or wrong and how to respond to life’s situations. In a school setting, there’s a mixture of different ways this discipline is enforced. Usually the principal, assistant principal, sports coaches, and a select few teachers are the ones to discipline students with fear. This may be a great way for the more hardheaded students to learn, but not for me.

Being a very charming individual, the discipline of fear amuses me, especially now since I’m older. I know how to behave from a great, balanced, discipline at home. But of course when those authority figures aren’t around, I do tend to bend the rules like any other teenager. When I get caught, my charm gets me through the consequences put in place. The most recent account of this was when I became a class disturbance while the morning announcements were on.

While the class sang the school’s alma mater, I felt like having fun and slow dancing to the tune with a friend. As I did this other friends made jokes. Because I was in a comfortable setting, I laughed loudly with my hilarious peers. As this classroom disturbance went on, the principal walked in. “Amara Skinner! Come get your administrative detention!” I thought to myself, “Wow he loves me. I bet I can get my way out of this.” Because school discipline is amusing to me I continued to smile while he tried to give me a stern lecture about how being a senior I must lead as an example. Using my charm I told him, “I didn’t do anything but laugh. I’m a young teenager. I have to let go sometimes.” He agreed and just gave me a five-minute lunch detention instead of a two-hour after-school detention.

Outside of home, authority and I get along quite well. For some reason they can’t find a great reason to discipline me harshly as other students. There have been times when I have witnessed students get punched, slapped, thrown, and yelled at for the same offense I did. This is also an offense I do very often during school, and my discipline is little to none. I noticed that it is because I received a great deal of discipline at home. Home training determines the level of discipline and rules set against students.

The bulk of my home training came from being told what’s right and wrong at a young age. I was taught how to approach authority and how to avoid trouble. They would take away things that mean the most to me, such as my computer, phone, television privileges, and going out privileges. I was never once hit to be disciplined. This is why I think that physical discipline is not effective.

On the other hand, many of my peers seem to lack these capabilities when they confront authority. I personally think it’s because most of them have been beaten. When you are hit, anger gets built up inside. When your own parent or parent figure hits you, you know not to hit them back. This leaves the child with nerves that must be released. Although some teachers do, they are not supposed to lay hands on a student. So if the child is being verbally disciplined, they react in a way in which they wish they can do at home. Or if the child is raising themselves or has to be the head of the house, they respond as if the situation was adult to adult. This leads to disrespectful children who need more discipline than others at school because they did not receive it correctly at home.

Discipline is a hard thing to teach a child. It’s supposed to make a positive impact on a growing child. But in today’s society, it looks like it doesn’t always come out that way. I was lucky enough to get it the right way.

Because I was taught to learn from everything and everyone's personal story, my response in certain conditions will continue to develop in a positive way. However, my peers need more work. With my level of instruction, I can go far in life and accomplish many things. Others may have to fight a bit harder to drop the habits they developed from incorrect teachings.

CAGING THE MIND

BY CHRISTIAN MARSHALL, McDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

Discipline and rules have been a major factor in my development and my identity. The discipline that my mom has instilled in me as well as the rules she has established in her household have helped shape me into the respectable, loyal, hardworking, dependable, young black man that I am right now. But in recent years my mom's rules and discipline have felt like shackles, shackles that not only restrict me physically, preventing me from straying too far from the confines of my home, but that also suppress my ability to freely express my opinion on things that concern me as well as my ability to think critically.

I remember an incident when an argument broke out between my mother and me. Of course, like always, it was over something simple. Such is the oppressive mindset of my mother caused by the situations she has been put in due to the authority in this country and its means of punishing those of us in society. My grandmother, my mother's mother, from what I know, constantly shackled my mother to the home. Why this was, I have no idea. But I do know that my grandmother lived during a time when someone in power or authority told you something you had to do it, no questions asked. So that same ideology and process of thinking was inherited by my mother, continuing the oppressive cycle of obedience and control. My mom's goal after graduation was to escape New Orleans, period. She had the mindset, she had the grades, she had the scholarships, and all she needed to do was apply. I can only surmise that she wanted to leave because she was tired of my grandmother, and applying to college was one of the only ways she knew to stay independent from her. That dream was dead in the eyes of my grandmother because she made my mother only apply to the local schools in the city, putting an end to her dream of escaping New Orleans, that is until she met my father, from Arkansas, in college which also acted as an opportunity for her to finally get away, start a family, and possibly live life the way she wanted to.

Now the oppression she had to endure, along with her feelings of it, are being placed on her children.

"I'm tired of telling you to do the same thing over and over," my mother said.

"Ma, why are you getting so upset? I didn't even do anything!"

She gave me that stone cold stare that can pierce one like a sharp knife, that basically means, "You can shut the hell up now." And I began to get more and more frustrated.

"How come every time we talk or get into an argument or debate it's always one-sided? I never get to voice my opinion on anything concerning myself, and you just expect me to sit here, be obedient, and not have anything to say?"

"Yes I actually do. I'm the mama. You not grown yet, and I told you before about talkin' to me like I'm one of your lil friends."

"Ma if I talked to you like I do with my friends or at school, you would be more offended than what you are now," I said with the confident look on my face. I was sick and tired of the repetitive bickering and anger that she constantly threw at me every other day.

“Are you still talking? How long is it going to take for you to know when to stop talking? Your sisters know already.”

There was a long pause, and in that amount of time, flashbacks of in-class discussions in my Students at the Center classes during the 7th period flooded into the back of my mind. I remembered the talks about our American culture, our country’s imperialistic ways and European history of suppression and oppression of foreign and new found ideas and cultures that came their way. Then it finally came out,

“Ma, that’s that oppressive white people stuff you talking right now. I can barely get a word out when I am talkin’ to you before you shoot me down.”

“Shut up. Stop talking. And yep maybe I am, but what I’m doing now ain’t nothing compared to what they’ll do to you when you leave and get out into this world. Society will judge you and will take everything you have and not give a damn about you.”

“So basically you’re trying to oppress me now in order to get me ready for the oppression I’ll face in the real world? That don’t make any sense. That’s really stupid. The one place I shouldn’t have to deal with oppression is my own house let alone from my own mama, the one who raised me along with my daddy to be independent, speak my mind, and not let anyone, especially society, change me.”

“Look Christian, it’s too late at night for me to be trying to be all philosophical with you, so just be quiet before I take your phone.”

“Okay, whatever,” I said with the most annoyed look on my face, rolling my eyes and sighing discretely enough to where she wouldn’t see or hear me to start another dispute.

Just like how there are rules established in my home intended to keep order, raise me well, but confine my mind, there are rules, and policies, supposedly intended for the betterment of people in society, but some of these rules and those who enforce them are only preventing us in society from fully using our cognitive abilities, shackling black people and culture down to the ways and ideologies of the authority in our American society, and even more so, wrongfully arresting, convicting, and incarcerating us.

Bryonn Bain has dealt with and discusses this physical and mental shackling in his book, *The Ugly Side Of Beautiful*. Even as a successful Harvard Law School student, poet, and writer, Bain is perceived as a typical black male from the Bronx, who only lives up to the stereotypical standards that society has placed on the African American male. In chapter 3 of his book, Bain discusses his time teaching teens in a prison on Rikers Island, identifying how the authority in the prison and its rules oppress and suppress the mental and physical condition of the teenagers, causing fear in them and causing them to forcibly submit to the ways of the authority.

Bain writes, “several Correctional Officers on duty repeatedly marched in to the classroom and yanked teenage inmates out by the arm. Without announcement or apology, the CO’s let everyone know that facility is a world where they control...Complain and get smoked? That sounded familiar. Sit in and get hosed down. Stand up and get lynched. Speak out and get assassinated... We laugh to keep from crying. We dream to keep from giving up...We imagine possibilities beyond these disturbing realities surrounding us everywhere we look.”

This has been and still is the crisis that African Americans are in in this society. We went from abiding by the rules that the slave master put in place for us to having to obey the rules and laws placed by the justice system, just so we don’t end up killed, or even worse put in jail. Maybe death is better than being thrown in prison, because at least in death we won’t have to live with the dehumanizing physical pain and mental struggle caused by incarceration. Our community of black people get distressed and frustrated when it’s just one or two members of our race who are victims of a death or unjust arrest, but what about the millions who are killed and

arrested every day in this country? Are we so “blinded by the white” that we can’t see the big picture? Why haven’t we yet come together to fight against the oppression that suppresses us and puts us in situations to be the victims? Why haven’t we formed working communities like the members of SAC do through writing and self-expression to tackle these issues that burden our minds and hearts every day?

This oppression and pressure of society affects those minds and identities like those of Rebecca Walker’s son in her narrative essay “Putting Down the Gun.” In this piece, Walker describes how her son comes home from middle school one day not looking his usual cheery self. After a while out of the blue her son says, “I’ve been thinking that maybe I should play sports at school...Maybe girls will like me if I play sports.” Being shocked about this discovery of her son’s mindset, she discusses and realizes that society has been having him hold a gun, beginning to be prepared for the patriarchal stereotypes and ways of life it expects him to live. Pushing the element of the “norm” on the minds of those in society only suppresses our critical thinking and assimilates us from our cultures and identities to those expressed and seen every day in society. Walker says, “The truth of his existence, his many likes and dislikes, none of them having to do with winning or killing of any kind, had no social currency. My son could compete and score, perform and win, or be an outcast or worse, invisible, his unique gifts unnoticed and unharvested, the world around him that much more impoverished.” So this is identifying that, in this society we really have no freedom, we are only given options, and whatever option we choose we have to make the best of. Either give in, be oppressed, and be swallowed by the ideologies of this society, or struggle and fight to keep your identity and sense of self-worth. This society barely likes change, and because of that, those who are unique in many aspects are categorized and segregated from the rest of the population. All of this causes burdens of rules and oppression placed on us by the authoritative power in this society, attempting to cage our minds.

Ironically, two weeks or so after the dispute with my mom, that oppression as well as the rules I so despised that come along with it, smacked me dead in the face. As I was driving to a baseball game on a Saturday morning, after already picking up my girlfriend and teammate, I was pulled over by a police officer. As I rolled down the window, I saw a short white man with black aviators on. Then came those famous words,

“Do you know why I pulled you over?”

“No sir, why?” I felt like an obedient slave responding to his master’s call. It had been a while since I had a reason to say “Yes sir...No sir.”

“You disregarded that yield sign back there, and I had to slam on my brakes to let you merge. Now if we would have had an accident, there would be a major issue. Let me see your license and registration please.”

“Yes, sir.” Nervous and distraught, I handed him my license, but I had to rummage through the glove box full of old papers for the registration and proof of insurance.

“Step out of the car please.”

“Uh, Okay,” I replied.

“I’ll explain in a second.” As I stepped out, he searched the driver’s side of the car. I could see my girlfriend, Theresa, looking at him with a disturbed look on her face. As he searched the van, he held his hand on his gun as if he was prepared for something.

“I saw something black in the glove box as I was searching, and in my line of work, in a lot of cases, it’s a weapon.”

Nodding my head in agreement, I couldn’t help but think, “Is this motha fucka serious? I’m in a minivan and dressed in a full baseball uniform with a car seat in the back. What am I gonna do?” But I respectfully and

calmly got back in my car when told to, received my ticket, and went about my business. As I was driving away, I couldn't help but think three things: One, this is some bullshit. Two, my mom is going to kill me. And three, this society is worse than I thought, affecting our homes, everyday lives, and what's worse our minds.

Dehumanizing pain and mental suffering are things that I am more than sure that Jerome Morgan had to survive as he wrongfully served twenty years of his life incarcerated in Angola, Louisiana's state penitentiary. As I read over the background of Jerome's case, the darkness behind our society's rules and justice system, as well as the enforcers of this "justice" seem to come to light. The appeals court judge said, "The evidence before this court is wrought with deception, manipulation, and coercion by the New Orleans Police Department. Both Kevin Johnson and Hakim Shabazz, a victim of the shooter himself, credibly testified that the NOPD coerced them to identify and match Jerome Morgan to his particular picture, even when they clearly removed that picture from the lineup for reasons being that he could not be the shooter."

So this reveals that we should not only be wary of the rules and laws within this society, but we also have to worry about those enforcing them as many of us "walk while black." This reveals the pressure and burdens placed on us by society's ideologies. This pressure slowly but surely causes us to be obedient and disciplined in the ways of these United States and "the man." The pressure got to Johnson and Shabazz, causing an intelligent, young black man like Jerome (who are growing scarce by the day) to be wrongfully incarcerated.

It seems like these rules, laws, and enforcers are indifferent to details, alibis, and evidence when it comes to the life of a black man. Such is evident in Bryan Wagner's *Disturbing The Peace*, as he speaks on the factors of "police power" and its connection to the ever changing ways of the African culture, and how it and society in general have transformed it from the rich culture of Africa, into mere "blackness." Wagner says, "...with police power, it does not matter here whether a crime has been committed...These details mark the self-evidence of the threat, and in the process, they define their bearers, which is to say that all other details are void once the threat is perceived...By these lights, it is foolish to put a snake on trial, not because he will have nothing to say in the witness box, but rather because he will bite you before you get him there."

We, black people, are the snakes. No not because we are "snitches," but because we pose such a threat to the authority that they see us as such, as vile, dangerous creatures, who once seen, they must exterminate on sight. This means that once someone is perceived as a target, all other evidence and witnesses are no longer relevant. Any information concerning a black man's possible innocence, seems to be unnecessary. This is the point in time that Wagner speaks of, when our rich culture from Africa, turned into "blackness." Our culture became blackness as soon as our ancestors stepped foot on that slave ship and arrived to this "land of the free." The stain on our skin and identity was created by the authority and is ever so often used against us. So evidence, eye witnesses, testimonies, none of that matters when it comes to a black man. When it comes to black men like me, Jerome, Jeramie, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, or Tamir Rice, there is no safety on the gun. It's just point and shoot. There is no fair trial. It's just lock him up and throw away the key. There are no witnesses to rightfully testify because we're always the prime suspect when the pressure gets a hold of them. When it comes to black men, black people, the black culture and diaspora, there is no freedom, there is no liberty, there is no self-expression, there are no civil rights, there is only mental and physical captivity.

INCARCERATION EFFECTS

BY JANELL EASTERLING, ELEANOR MCMAN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Can you imagine being stopped and frisked in public? Then being thrown into the back of a cop car without knowing your rights? What about sitting in a cell with a backed-up toilet and no disinfectant spray? Could you

stand to hear the punishment of your crime? Would you lose your sanity being housed in solitary confinement? Do you think when you're released your life will be the same? All stages of incarceration have an effect of dehumanization.

Bryonn Bain is not only an author, but a poet, lawyer and also a teacher. In Chapter One, "Walking While Black—The Bill of Rights for Black America" of his book *The Ugly Side of Beautiful*, Bain recounts his first encounter with the "Law." He opens with "After hundreds of hours and thousands of pages of legal theory in law school, I finally had my first real lesson in the Law," introducing the idea that there is more to the police than what meets the eye. This is essentially like smoke and mirrors. As the current events dealing with the law enforcement have unfolded, the smoke is beginning to clear and mirrors are shattering, though. Fresh from school, Bain, his brother, and cousin decided to partake in a little fun at the "Latin Quarter" nightclub. He recalls that his younger brother K "was fiending for a turkey sandwich, "which resulted in them going to a nearby bodega. He stated that as they entered the store, "We had no idea that class was about to be in session." The lesson was on a "special Bill of Rights for nonwhite people in the United States." He insists that it applies mainly to black men. The story continues as he says that they left the store "armed with sandwiches and Snapples." Between this line and detail about going to the club, the reader can imply that it was a rather simple night. He then sets up the reasoning behind the entire ordeal with the police that night. He states a group of young men, assumed to be black, were creating chaos in the neighborhood. One of the males began "throwing bottles at the apartment window." As this was taking place, he, his brother and cousin began walking to the subway, trying to avoid the conflict. As they made their way up the block, the group of troublemakers was escaping the scene. Being that he, his brother, cousin and group of males were black, the bouncers from the Latin Quarter immediately assumed them to be a part of it. As an altercation ensued between the groups, the bouncers were angered by their knowledge of rights and called the police. "That's them, officer!" he writes the head bouncer told the police. This he states in the powerful line that the bouncer "indicted them with a single sentence." As Bain continues the story, he adds that "each of us had the legs of our dignity spread apart" while they were searched. They were not Mirandized, but were belittled by the police as if they were uneducated.

William Blake has been in solitary confinement for 27 years. When he was 23 years old while in county court on a drug charge, Blake murdered one deputy and wounded another in a failed escape attempt. He was sentenced 77 years to life in prison. He shares what solitary confinement is like in "Voices from Solitary: A Sentence Worse Than Death." "You deserve an eternity in hell," he recalls Onondaga County Supreme Court judge Kevin Mulroy telling him before his sentencing. He calls into question why the judge thought he had such a power to determine such a thing when he says, "Apparently he had the idea that God was not the only one qualified to make such judgment calls." He says the judge initially wanted him to receive the death penalty, but the then-governor of New York wouldn't allow it. He starts his description with "Prisoners call it The Box. Prison authorities have euphemistically dubbed it the Special Housing Unit, or SHU (pronounced 'shoe') for short." He then goes on to define it as a 23-hour-a-day lockdown in a cell smaller than some closets I've seen...." The reader can just about visualize just how strict it is. According to Blake, they are allowed one hour for "recreation." During this hour they are placed in a concrete enclosed yard or a cage made of steel bars. "There is nothing in a SHU yard but air: no TV, no balls to bounce, no games to play, no other inmates, nothing. There is very little allowed in a SHU cell, also. Three sets of plain white underwear, one pair of green pants, one green short-sleeved button-up shirt, one green sweatshirt, ten books or magazines total, twenty pictures of the people you love, writing supplies, a bar of soap, toothbrush and toothpaste, one deodorant stick but no shampoo, and that's about it. No clothes of your own, only prison-made."

As a teenager myself, I couldn't fathom living in such conditions. I check my phone every 15 minutes, Instagram almost every hour and don't go a single day without getting on my laptop. They are fed "only three unappetizing meals a day," which are handed to them through a narrow slot in the cell door. They do however get

“a set of cheap headphones to use.” They can pick “between the two or three (depending on which prison you’re in) jacks in the cell wall to plug into. You can listen to a TV station in one jack, and use your imagination while trying to figure out what is going on when the music indicates drama but the dialogue doesn’t suffice to tell you anything. Or you can listen to some music, but you’re out of luck if you’re a rock-n-roll fan and find only rap is playing.” His topic then shifts to “boredom.” He says that what we label as boredom would be a “whirlwind” of activities to him. “You could turn on a TV and watch a movie or some other show; I haven’t seen a TV since the 1980s. You could go for a walk in the neighborhood; I can’t walk more than a few feet in any direction before I run into a concrete wall or steel bars.” He adds, “You could pick up your phone and call a friend... play with your dog or cat and experience their love, or watch your fish in their aquarium; the only creatures I see daily are the mice and cockroaches that infest the unit.” He insists that we take such things for granted because we have them at our disposal, and if they were stripped from us, we would without a doubt miss them.

“Boxed In: How a Criminal Record Keeps You Unemployed For Life” by Kai Wright explores life after incarceration. We’re introduced to Luis Rivera as the essay opens: “[he] had some peace of mind for about five months, from fall of 2010 through early spring of the following year.” This peace of mind comes from a financial stability, which he supposedly hasn’t had in almost 20 years. The job consisted of being “a clerk/porter/doorman... at a high-rise classical building in the East Village.” Rivera, who is 44 years old, is noted as being “ferociously proud of his marriage and children.” It’s later stated that he was “excited” about the job even though it tore him away from the very family he was proud of. This leads readers to question why. The answer can be found in the next paragraph, “Because I needed the job.” He received \$17 an hour, but only worked part time. “I was next to be hired in a position there permanently.” This would be his first legit job. Like many others with records, up until that point, he had no steady job and worked many informal jobs. While applying for another job “he was honest to a fault.” He explained the circumstances of his past to the man who was apparently doing an interview. The man vowed not to tell, but eventually did. “Suddenly, the upscale building at which Rivera hoped to build a future stopped giving him shifts at all.” The reasoning as told to him by his boss was “...due to the fact that this is a fancy place, anything could happen.” All of this is because of a record he received at the age of 22 for burglary. He, however, did not serve time for this crime; he was simply released to his parents’ custody and given five years of probation. Rivera says that “Twenty years later, [and] it’s still there.”

All of these situations were different, but each has a person being dehumanized in common. You probably wouldn’t know how to handle being stopped and frisked. You mostly likely wouldn’t know how to control your emotions in the back of a squad car. You couldn’t bear hearing the consequences of your actions. You couldn’t maintain your mind never seeing so much as a single blade of grass. Hard wouldn’t even quite describe your “life-after.”

BLACK RARITY

BY AMARA SKINNER, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

The overall role and goal of discipline is to teach a child what’s right and wrong and how to respond to life’s situations. There is a mixture of different ways this discipline is enforced. At home, I was taught to do simple things such as respect authority. As a young kid, being disciplined was a scary thing. My nanny told me that in front of people who can make me serve any consequences, I must be on my best behavior. As I grew older, this advice turned from just authority to all adults, especially white elders. One time, I was at a dance competition that was predominantly white. In my hand was an energy drink. Before walking into the theatre’s seating area,

I witnessed three white women exit with trash from food in their hands. I thought that food and drinks were allowed, so I walked in. A white usher grabbed me, snatched my drink and threw it in the trash. I kept my calm because I know that she would expect me to become very hostile.

“Why would you do that?” I asked.

She said to me, “No drinks or food in the theatre.”

I became furious, but I kept my emotions contained. I said to the lady, “So you didn’t see those people with food? Why didn’t you just ask me to leave the area instead of being rude?”

She had no answer. Later, she told my nanny that she thought if she told me to exit, I would become angry and cause a scene. She said, “Her kind is very wild.”

I thought about all the times I was given a stern look from my nanny that told me not to do anything shameful or that I would regret. I didn’t want to bring shame to my family or race. That’s why I kept my composure. But I thought it was so crazy that because of my skin color she just assumed the worst would happen, so she did the worst to me to prevent it. This was my first time learning from personal experience the perspective of whites that still have that historic mentality.

There was a growing fear every time I was given a stern look as I began to do something wrong. That stern look she gave me became a part of my guilty conscience. I found myself picturing those eyes that were so sharp they can pierce your skin, that tightly curled lip, and the words I knew she was saying in her head, “you better not!” I remember when I began high school and got my first boyfriend. She told me, “When I meet this little boy, he better come with some decency.” I took this statement to heart. I didn’t let her meet him until maybe seven months into the relationship, wondering was he good enough for her. Again, I didn’t want to do anything to shame my family. I especially didn’t want a male who might be a shame to my race either.

To this day I still think of what she told me. Basically, she didn’t want me to bring home a ghetto thug with sagging pants, a nice boy that ironically had been in and out of jail, or a young man without a good education or life goals. Now, that type is nonexistent to my “dating type.” But, since I do prefer black males, I find it hard to find the type that I am looking for. When I’m older, I would want a well-educated man who hasn’t been arrested. In W.E.B. DuBois’s *Souls of Black Folk*, he says college graduates understand the importance of operating as a unit. He describes them as “conservative, careful leaders.” In this case you would think they wouldn’t get into any trouble with the police, but this is untrue.

In Brent Staples’s “Just Walk on By,” he tells a story about how his skin tone and presence was enough to scare a white woman. His attire was very presentable, just like any well-dressed man. But it was because he was an African American he suddenly became a threat to society. To find a man to fit the description I like will be hard. Today black men are getting gunned down by the police and wrongly incarcerated, even though they were completely innocent. By the time we’re adults, there will be a great amount of black men who have these obscene crimes on their records. The police assume the worst will happen, so they do the worst to them to prevent it.

African Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites. African Americans now constitute nearly 1 million of the total 2.3 million incarcerated population. One in six black men had been incarcerated as of 2001. This trend has continued. One in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison

during his lifetime.¹¹⁷ The rate of people wrongly convicted is 4.1 percent.¹¹⁸ This is very high due to the fact that this rate should be 0 percent. Black men are half as likely as white men to earn a bachelor's degree within six years of entering college. Only 29 percent graduate in four years, if they even enroll.¹¹⁹ That leaves a small window of men for me to choose from.

People say you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. In this case, "You shouldn't judge a book by its rough drafts." I find this difficult to do because it is hard to know if the man really committed these crimes, or if he is a mischievous mastermind. It makes me question if these males have had the same home training as me, or did society attack them for existing. The safe thing to do is find someone whose record is completely clean. I say "safe" because sometimes the book isn't what the cover portrays it to be. It is ironic I say this because I am now in the place of the white woman Brent Staples encountered. I can't rely on my own eyes and first judgment. I see the cover and know what has happened and what can happen to him. But, because I am unsure of the truth of his story, I place the book down and never open it again. Assuming the worst is true, I do the worst to the male to prevent this from being true; I avoid him.

I would like someone who has something similar to my home discipline and is educated on how to respond to racist authority and the history of the matter. In James McBride's "Hip Hop Planet" he describes hip hop as a burning man. We notice the burning man, help to tame his flames, but we do not care for the source. However, in this society, we see the racism, pretend to stop it while actually carrying it on, and we know the source but choose to fake like it doesn't still affect people today. The burning man is that racism and mental slavery still exists. For the white man to control the black man they need to keep something dangling over black heads. That something is black pride and dignity. To maintain this pride and dignity we must stay alive and terminate the stereotypes. Terminating the stereotypes is a process which is being done every day by black people rising up in society doing the unexpected. However, staying alive is hard to do. Just like during slavery and Jim Crow, African Americans are judged horribly and suffer fatal consequences. To avoid this, African Americans, especially the men, need to present themselves to society twice as well as the white people. Sometimes even this isn't enough. Our innocent men are killed and put in jail every day, much like the lynchings decades ago. An ignorant black male would see this as white hate. An educated black man, especially on this subject, would see this as an ongoing cycle that has no control. If they understand this cycle, they know to always be presentable, but any day can be the day they become another Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, or Michael Brown. The white man assumed these black men would proceed with the worst case scenario, so they did the worst to them to prevent it.

My female peers see it easier to just date a white person. They feel that a white male who isn't frowned upon in society is easier to deal with than a black male. If this country was half black and half white, more blacks would be in jail than whites. The only reason the ratio of white to blacks in prison is higher is because they hold a higher percentage of the population. The chances of me to find a black man who hasn't been incarcerated, has great discipline, and is educated about this corrupt nation are very slim. This is because these men are all getting killed by the government or thrown into jail. The chances of me finding a free white felon instead of an innocent black man are much higher because of the way this country and its biased system are set up. Not to mention while walking in the street I will see more white men than black because so many of our boys are in jail.

¹¹⁷ "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet." *NAACP*. <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>

¹¹⁸ Virginia Hughes, "How Many People Are Wrongly Convicted? Researchers do the Math," *National Geographic*, April 28, 2014, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/phenomena/2014/04/28/how-many-people-are-wrongly-convicted-researchers-do-the-math/>

¹¹⁹ "Advancing Success for Black Men in College: A Statistical Profile," *Educational Testing Service*, 2014, https://www.ets.org/s/achievement_gap/rsc/pdf/26134_advancing_success.pdf.

UNBOTHERED

BY ATIKA BOOZE, ELEANOR MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

For countless years, I have been content with my father's incarceration. I haven't been happy about it, but being young and voiceless, I have no choice in the matter. I recall when I was younger. I remember everything that happened, how it all went down. I remember when the police came into my house and took my father. I remember my mother telling me don't leave this room, while handing me a cup of Kool Aid, telling me to not lay down while I drink it. I remember still laying down and all of the juice spilled over the pillow. It was as if that Kool Aid spilling all over that pillow signified how my life was slowly going to waste. My life was all over. It was all over for me. In my heart, at that exact moment, I felt as if nothing else would ever fall into place the correct way. Because I had lost the first man of my life.

Fast forwarding a couple of years later, I remember talking to my father when I was in about the 5th or 6th grade. My father had called our house and asked to speak to me. I was a little bit resistant at first, but not having spoken to him in so long, I could not wait to hear what he had to say. He told me to stay strong because he would be home soon. I asked him how soon is soon. He told me three years tops. Now, as I am nearly finished with my senior year in high school, I still await the man whom my mother married, my father, and the man who raised me for seven years, to return from his cage of confinement.

My father recently contacted me, wrote me a letter. In this letter he wanted me to write a letter to the Innocence Project, explaining why he was arrested and that he was falsely convicted. My thoughts immediately started to run wild. He was not innocent. The crimes he committed were his crimes. Even if I could, my father would get no mercy from me.

My father knew he hurt us all. My father knew he would regret it. And when he left, he hit my mother where it hurts.

He hit her pockets. We were living in and out of hotels and motels cause we had to sell the house. We never really had people there by our side: living with my uncle who threw slangs every day towards my mother about when we'd move out. We lived with my cousins. When I was best friends with Tyjai, she let me live with her so we wouldn't all be packed up in my uncle's house. What could I do? Nothing.

My father's incarceration is not the only one that tainted our family. My Grandfather, mother's father, was once arrested for a statutory charge whereas he, unlike my father, was falsely convicted. My grandfather was released from jail and immediately made it up to my mother. He never once lied to her.

I think the real reason I care nothing about my father is because of his actions. I used to watch my parents fight. My father was raising his voice, and my mother was losing tears I never knew were inside of her. My father, the alcoholic, beating my mother because he had a bit too much whiskey at a random bar on the corner of Heartache and Disappointments. I remember looking at the man and saying to myself, "This is not Richard. This man is not my father." The little girl on the inside was just dying to get that terrible man off my mother. My mother. But there was nothing I could do about it. I just walked into my bedroom, the most peaceful place of my childhood. I would stare at the glow up star stickers all around me. I would hide under my comforter and talk to the stars, moons, and suns on my cover. Mr. Moon always made me feel better. But Mrs. Sun had the warmest smile I had ever seen. These were my friends.

I've never forgotten what my father has done. His mistakes continue to disturb me. Whenever I'm in trouble with my mother, whenever I get fussed at, I cry. Only because I feel like I'm turning into my father. Upsetting

my mother. I judge every guy I meet based on the way my father was. Does he drink? Is he always angry? Where is his life going? Is he honest?

I chalk up my uncontrollable emotions to his absence. It seems like everything that happens in my life sparks terrible memories of that monstrous excuse of a father. Everything I see. Everything I do. I just want to thank my father for emotionally corrupting me. For hurting the one woman I love more than anything. For destroying the relationship between you and me. Thanks a lot dad. I love you too.

CRYING FOR NOTHIN’ BY BRELAND LEON, ELEANOR MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

The other day I watched my niece get “popped” on the wrist really bad for bothering her father. She cried loudly as her tears dampened her shirt. It clearly hurt her really badly, because she whined for about 45 minutes, nonstop.

“Why y’all had to beat her like that?”

My brother looked at me with confusion. He was puzzled when I questioned his parenting skills. “Maaan she iight. I ain’t even hit her that hard.”

I looked into my niece’s eyes. They were filled with liquid that personified the hurt after betrayal of a father. She was no longer daddy’s little girl. She was now an ass whipping waiting to happen - a “she know better.” As I began to empathize, I felt every bit of pain my niece felt. I pondered what was really happening. He said he was simply disciplining her. I responded to him as bluntly as possible with my gestures. I then began snapping at my niece, making her become responsive to my beckons. My brother wasn’t pleased with my gestures and said, “She ain’t no dog!” This is what I wanted. I wanted him to experience the discontent I felt. I then replied, “Then why you beat her like one?” He stated the fact that it was his child and he can do what he wants.

Everyone thought I was just trying to pick an argument with him, but it wasn’t that. I felt her pain. I knew that pain, because it happened to me. As the sun that pierced between the dull brown curtain hit her tear, a million memories flashed through my mind. “It’s called child discipline!” I call it unconscious repetition of the past.

During the slavery era, this training with punishment called discipline heightened. Beatings were a custom. My grandma always would tell me this short phrase that she heard from the ancestors - “It wasn’t always like that.” I always asked my grandma what she meant. She would go on to say that discipline came about through proper guidance and trial and error; now people have to hit on one another. (Before slavery to slavery and post slavery)

It made so much sense, after the explanation. The one who undergoes disciplinary actions always feels as though things could have been handled calmly by corrections. However, the method for discipline, that’s so frequently used, is beatings. And for some reason, the disciplinarians think it’s ok to hurt one physically. It doesn’t increase the understanding of what’s right. It instills fear. It’s not guaranteed that a person won’t make the same mistake. It makes them scared to make mistakes again - even though we learn from our mistakes by direct comparison to the correct things. How do you learn without trial and error? You get beat by someone who has unconsciously rekindled the past and channeled the powers of the invader in their ancestry tree.

R. B. I. (REVIVING THE BLACK IDENTITY)

BY CHRISTIAN MARSHALL, McDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

Imagine being a young black man living in a single-parent home, one mother, three younger sisters, and no father, because he passed away. Now imagine the feeling of being alone and having to develop yourself as a young man because there is no male figure present in the home to interact with and provide motivation and support. The only uncle on his mother's side is locked up in jail for a murder he possibly didn't commit, and the uncle on his father's side is eight to nine hours away, both having a telephone call as a common means of communication. Now, finally imagine how this young black man feels when he has to go up against and grow up in a world that, in his mind, has every means of handicapping him, both mentally and spiritually, so that he can't achieve his dream. Despite the straight A's, athletic rewards, other achievements he's earned, and the mindset and determination to dream big and be successful, somehow he still feels like the road ahead of him will be hard to travel, and he almost feels like giving up. With the recent displays of horrific police brutality, the majority of his family's history of drugs and crime, and the general knowledge of how this society can treat a black man, he feels like the odds may be against him. Without a male figure to constantly go to for support and guidance, how will he know how to "walk while black" and still live to see the next day? How will he know how to deal with the struggles that this society creates not only for him but his family through oppression and poverty? His uncle Edward III, who has been misguided, probably due to the death and absence of his father at an early age, and incarcerated, in his eyes, yet has a great heart, one that will do anything it takes to protect his family and survive in this world of oppression. Edward III has been through what this young black man fears the most, what I fear the most.

There are many black men like my uncle going through the process of "rehabilitation" in the judicial system, but yet they have much wisdom and experience to offer young black men like myself. Their experiences, their wrong doings, could be the one thing that opens troubled teenagers' eyes and minds to realize exactly what path they're going down and could be the means of letting those who are doing well for themselves know to stay on that path and succeed in life. Men like Ariana Newman's brother, Gordon, who is her "go to guy" when she feels times are getting rough and needs support, even with those timed operator reminders interrupting her 15-minute call from him in the Angola State Penitentiary. "Not only did I want to address their incarceration, but their rehabilitation and the vital role that rehabilitated men would have in society... Over a decade of incarceration and rehabilitation, I believe my brother is able to be released into society... For example if he meets a single mother, he can help teach her kids to avoid the path he took, and he can also be a mentor to others."(Newman) Newman identifies how a black man can play a vital role in the home solely based on the fact that she analyzes if her brother were to meet a "single" mother, not just any mother with kids that could be troubled, identifying the issue of how there is a lack of male support in black homes and communities.

Even men who were boys at one point, such as Malcolm X, had to deal with the lack of a male figure in his home, while having to live with and take care of his ill mother. Malcolm lived in the era of Jim Crow, having to deal with racism, segregation, and the denial of opportunity for black men. Even in this era men were being persecuted, lynched, and put in other situations where the family suffered as a consequence, resulting in young men like Malcolm to have no guidance in the future. Not only was it this lack of a male figure, but also the racist mentality of the society telling him, "you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer – that's no realistic goal for a nigger." (Williams) These words mentally maimed him of the determination to succeed in life, resulting in his detour down a negative path. In my opinion, when dealing with what the society has against a black man, only an older, more experienced black male could have helped guide and advise Malcolm on how to deal with that, but he didn't have one for support. This also identifies the fact that this society of

ours is only taking away our black male figures in our communities and homes, in order to continue the cycle of oppression that began in the 19th century.

Through the support and presence of black men, “the black community may have a chance to revive itself.”(Newman) The fact that Newman identifies that the black community needs to be revived at all points at the bigger contribution that the black male plays in households and communities, and that is helping to slow down the cycle of oppression, poverty, and ignorance that has been set in place by the hierarchal power of this society. Poverty, the increasing rate of poverty and incarceration, and young black boys becoming another “statistic,” all have to be caused by something, and in order for the black men of this generation and the next to no longer become a statistic, they need guidance. “Abundant research shows that family structures themselves are strongly tied to economic standing... Children in poverty are much more likely to experience exposure to violence, chronic neglect, and the accumulated burdens of economic hardship.” (Mack) To break it down even further, since family structures are tied to economic standing, and the majority of children who are in poverty live in a single-parent home, specifically with single mothers, proves that the lack of the black male presence is caused by the authority that has control over our society’s economy and has the ability to cause major shifts in the way that a class of people live in this society.

The lack of a male figure doesn’t only come from incarceration but can also possibly come from unemployment. Mack’s article says that low-income couples are the least likely to stay together in the home. Absence can also be caused by death, and in most cases these days the cause of death is by the hands of another black man who has been blinded by what the white society feeds to him. But the main point is that the hierarchal system of our society is causing the existence of the black male to slowly draw to a close.

Luckily, I had a father in my house in the earlier years of my life to create a foundation for this development. Yet unfortunately he wasn’t here for, what now seems to be, some of the most important moments of my life: developing an identity in high school, high school graduation, the transition into college, dealing with law enforcement and authority, a lot of which I have had to handle on my own. Maybe if the structure of our society were different, who knows, maybe the situations that I and a lot of other young black men are dealing with wouldn’t be what they are now. Maybe our communities would be better unified, and we wouldn’t have to deal with the ignorance that the authority places on our rich culture that include the characteristics upon which this country of ours is supposed to be founded: democracy, liberty, community, and agape love. With the inclusion of the “rehabilitated,” the wise, the old, and the up-and-coming black men, we could possibly see a positive change in the way that our community and society functions. Instead of focusing on “rehabilitating” the black man, maybe society needs to think about rehabilitating itself.

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HELL ON EARTH—JAIL!

BY EDELMY MARIN, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

Dedicated to my mother...

I don't know if it was my fault, but I do know that it wouldn't have happened if it wasn't because of me...

When I look through my life, I realize that I have not been paying much attention to the rules/laws, control/discipline, punishment, and/or incarceration around me. Or maybe I have because I am able to say this while sitting on a comfortable bed, my bed. I have always obeyed the “rules” everywhere I go. I am very disciplined, in my own way. I have done all this in order to keep myself away from hell... Jail.

“Mami, have you ever been incarcerated before?” she asked her mother.

“Yes, I have,” answered the mother.

The lady’s facial expression changed drastically. She didn’t look sad, but hurt. The young lady—the daughter—was surprised, but she also felt her mother’s pain.

You might be asking why? The answer is simpler than it appears to be; for the daughter, she was the cause of her mother’s suffering.

For both of them, there isn’t much to do but cry.

Somewhere in the daughter’s mind, she still wants to know what happened to her mother in that place that many people have talked about before, that same place that she never imagined her mother to be staying, not even for a day. And once again her curiosity surpassed her deepest feeling—guilt, and she decided to ask her mother what happened to her in that place, jail.

Jail is often feared by some, despised by many, and inhabited by many more.

Those who fear it, do so because they believe that jail is the place where “bad people” go to pay for the crimes they have committed. For those who fear jail, those “criminals” are there because they deserve to be punished. Those who despise jail do so because jail has done many more bad things to them than it has done “good.” Oh, good... that is what jails are designed for, to keep our society with a “lower” number of “criminals” walking free.

It is funny how freedom is the strongest ideal for this country, yet it keeps the highest number of slaves worldwide.

You might be wondering which country am I talking about, right? For many of you, I cannot be talking about the great America. Oh no, not indeed. Slavery is over in America. Slavery is illegal in America since the Thirteenth Amendment was passed by congress in 1865. I am here to tell you today—almost 150 years after the Thirteenth Amendment was adopted with the purpose of “eliminating” slavery in America—that it has not. Since December of 1865 this country adopted a new way of slavery, which is also stated in the same amendment that was supposed to “abolish” such inhumane practice.

Today, at almost 150 years after, America continues to hold its citizens (for the most part) confined and generating many millions, if not billions or trillions of dollars through harsh labor in the most despised places of this world, after “hell,” jails. And I might say that some individuals believe jails to be hell on earth. I do not blame them; I would feel the same way, if I was brought up in a society that praises freedom so much, if I was to be taught that my country is the freest place in the entire world. I would definitely despise jail, for I would never stand to be confined in my “free” country.

Today, fortunately the mother is free in the same country that kept her locked behind steel bars. She never revealed to her daughter what happened in “hell” because she knows, or somewhere in her mind she remembers, that she wouldn’t have been in this country if her daughter wouldn’t have motivated her to do so. As young as she was, the daughter’s existence is what brought Mami to cross the border. The mother was seeking the American Dream, which many people consider the longing for “freedom, justice, and equal opportunities for success for all,” and she ended up being captured, restricted from her freedom. For some reason, the mother

knows that it is better to keep her suffering in silence for what happened in jail to her, even though her daughter still feels her mother's pain just by looking at her eyes.

Even though she doesn't know what happened in detail to her mother in jail, her sharp little mind wanders... and wonders what happened in that place.

At almost nine years of the event that marked these two women's lives, the daughter who is mature enough sits down and analyzes and imagines her mother's experience in jail.

The place where my mother slept must have been like ice, hard and cold. Three concrete walls and a pallet of steel around her, they keep her from running away. Fortunately, the only thing that they cannot stop from fleeing is her thoughts about the same reason why she is suffering. Thinking is what kept her from going crazy, for it is usually those who are insane who experience confinement most harshly. She was indeed surrounded by "criminals," yet her only crime was trying to seek a better life for her daughter. For the keepers she was just another criminal. They never cared about her or the reason she was in that place. It was in that same place where she found many others like her; and without them knowing it, all those mothers formed part of an arbitrary community. Despite their origins most of them were in hell because of what many others said about America, for that place where one lives a better life than in one's country. They were there for their daughters, sons, grandmothers and grandfathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and also for themselves. They simply wanted a better life, and that was their crime. A community of "better life opportunities seekers" was suddenly converted into a community of criminals by America. More than criminals, those granddaughters, mothers, and sisters were so close to becoming slaves.

Was that enough reason to be punished? I ask myself. I also think about other Americans who are incarcerated, often punished, made into slaves, without "deserving" it. Perhaps "deserve" shouldn't be the word to describe this situation because I believe nobody deserves to be treated as a slave unless that person was a slave owner once.

I talk too much. Sometimes I feel like I really do talk too much. But am I wrong for talking "too much" when there is so much more I have to say?

"Shhh, stay quiet because you might get in trouble for saying what you want to say." This is what I imagine some Americans telling me while they read my writings. I just smile and pretend that they are not talking to me. Imagination works in my favor... But have they imagined, perhaps thought about their situation? They live in a country in which "freedom" is so verbally praised, yet so disrespected through actions, unaware that such a thing is going on here. How do they ask me to stay quiet, to keep my words to myself when this is a country in which "freedom of speech" is a citizen's right? Oh, yeah! They probably figured out that even though I am writing in their language, my thoughts and ideas are foreign and extremely different than many of them. Nevertheless I am definitely sure that there are others who are citizens of this country and know what I am talking about. Those "others" realize that they are being fooled, yet they don't say anything. They all simply stay quiet, for one's words can become just another reason to fall into the darkness and coldness of hell on earth, jail.

I won't stay quiet, for I have been silenced during the last three years.

I won't stay quiet, for I am not an American.

I won't stay quiet, for I know there are others out there who need to see others speaking; they want to speak as well.

I won't stay quiet, for I don't want another mother to be punished because she wants something better for her daughter, or her family, or herself.

I won't stay quiet, for I know that there are many men who just as those mothers are innocent, yet they are still being punished for "crimes" they did not commit. I must speak for more Jeromes, Kevins, Dariuses, Joshuas, Pablos, Nicks, Manuels, and many others who reside in hell on earth, even though they are not guilty of the "crimes" they are accused of committing. For all my brothers and sisters whose only crime was to be born with the same skin color as me; for all my people whose only fault was to be born outside this country, those who have the fortune or the misfortune to be born in the Americas, but not in America; I must say this for them: being different is not a cause to be punished.

I won't stay quiet, for if I am to be kept confined, I would prefer to be confined for "committing a crime – writing," than to lose my freedom for not saying a word, and then the slave owners of the country –those who benefit from their slavery business, jail– decide to throw me and many others into a cave just because they feel like it.

I won't stay quiet, for I know the slave owners already started to do so, but they fear that sooner or later the citizens of this country will notice their system and revolt against them.

They are so scared, for they know that just as over 200 years ago and more, the people will get tired and fight their base practices. And that time is approaching because even I, who am not a citizen of this country, have begun to write about this situation. I am sure I am not the first one to do so because I know that all these ideas and opinions come from what I have seen in this country, and also what I have read. I am not the first one, and I won't be the last one....

We won't stay quiet!

“WHY DID THEY SHOOT ME?”

BY JANELL EASTERLING, ELEANOR MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

“They kill our daddies, then make fun of us for being fatherless.”

If I had a son, I wouldn't let him outside of the house past six o'clock without me. If I had a son, he wouldn't be allowed to own a hoodie. If I had a son, he couldn't wear dark-colored clothes. If I had a son, I would buy him a million belts that are a little too small, just to make sure his pants stay up. If I had a son, he would be home-schooled. If I had a son, his father and I would be his only friends. America's all too powerful police, who serve the purpose of "protecting," have implemented a fear of bringing a black son into the world.

In the wake of Mike Brown and Eric Garner, a question of authority, like a bad rash, resurfaces. Do police have license to kill without consequence?

“Who do you call when the police commit murder?”

Kendrec McDade, a 19-year-old black male, was killed March 24, 2012, when Officers Jeffrey Newlen and Mathew Griffin responded to a report of an armed robbery in northwest Pasadena. Oscar Carrillo, who reported that his computer had been stolen, had falsely told police that he had been robbed at gunpoint and later claimed he saw what he thought was the barrel of a gun. After arriving on the scene, the officers said they chased McDade in a police car. At some point, Newlen exited the car and began to chase McDade on foot. Griffin, still in the patrol car, sped past Kendrec and blocked the street. McDade allegedly was about to run past the car when he turned and ran toward Griffin.

“He left the sidewalk and he’s running at me..., This -- this scares the crap out of me. I don’t know why he is running at me. He’s still clutching his waistband. I think he’s got a gun. I’m stuck in the car. I got nowhere to go.” Griffin told investigators.

“Fearing for his life,” Griffin said he fired four times through the open driver’s side window. Griffin said he then ducked down to avoid being hit by shots. These shots he believed would come from McDade. He heard two shots and assumed McDade had fired at him. Newlen said he heard gunshots and believed Kendrec was firing at Griffin. Newlen continued that he heard more shots and saw the barrel of a gun (McDade was later found to be unarmed, only carrying a cellphone in his pocket). He then thought McDade was firing at him and, as a result, fired four or five more shots.

An attorney asked, “Did you ever say to him, ‘Put your hands up’ before you shot him?”

Griffin’s answer was “No.”

Later, Griffin was asked, “Did you give him any warning at all you were going to shoot?” Griffin again answered “No.” Both officers admitted it was the first time they had been involved in a shooting.

The officers were cleared in the shooting by the District Attorney’s Office and an internal investigation. Both have returned to duty.

In this year alone, the police have shot and killed the following African American men: Romain Brisbon, Tamir Rice, Akai Gurley, Kajieme Powell, Ezell Ford, Dante Parker, Michael Brown, John Crawford III, Tyree Woodson, Eric Garner, Victor White III, McKenzie Cochran, and Jordan Baker. No officers have been indicted for any of these incidents.

Police reform is past the point of necessary any time an armed, white, mass murderer is allowed to surrender willfully. Yet, a black man carrying a pill bottle is shot and killed on sight like a dangerous animal. It’s evident not much has changed since Bloody Sunday in Selma.

If I had a son, I hope his skin would be pale. If I had a son, I hope he would never have to ask...

“Why did they shoot me?”

PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

BY KEISHA LOCKETT, ELEANOR MCMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Dear Dad,

You obviously have no sense of what it means to be a person. At least one that cares. You think that you could just walk out like that and think it will all just disappear from existence. Well it doesn’t work that way. It grows and grows on you and finds its way to show you that. You walk upstairs and say you’re leaving, trying to act as though your heart is as hard as that wooden step your foot touched. The audacity to walk up here. How should an eight-year-old take this? I’m eight. I don’t know what to do. You treat the situation as something you can just step over and keep moving. Well I guess that I will do the same. Keep moving.

All that aggression, emotion and anger is gone now. I think back and realize that throughout all these long years, it wasn’t me who pointed the eye of the hurricane over your life. I don’t know how long it will take you to admit that, but I’ll say it for you. The first paragraph, the one with all the emotion, immature emotion, was something I used to say when I was younger. Well I’m not young anymore, and the clock isn’t turning back either. When I say immature, I don’t mean stupid but rather I was too young to comprehend what was going

on, and anger was the only emotion I could turn to. Now that I'm older, I've experienced a few things to put the pieces of the puzzle together. I thank you for helping me put it together to reveal a picture it takes some people years to put together and others over and over again. That puzzle reveals the journey of life.

You taught me to never let someone steal your joy, never give up no matter how high the step is. As I got older, you and everyone else in my life taught me that there's no greater high in life than the feeling of success within yourself. Sort of loving who you are. When I was younger, you leaving made me think you didn't want me in your future. I sometimes thought what could have I possibly done that bad to drive you away? And prison was your second choice of a home? You've been in and out of prison. You've called a number of times asking me to wish you luck in court and sometimes luck just didn't cut it.

I know from all the countless numbers of letters you wrote to me about regret, love and lies that you probably started to learn a few of life's lessons, but I may be wrong. I remember reading your letters of how you would come home and we'll study for that History test together. I thought to myself, "This will never happen..." I must have been a fortune teller because once your sentence was over I could have sworn you were still in prison. I don't know what home you were talking about because I looked out the window every day, and the only person walking up the steps, to the door, was the mailman.

I knew you weren't ready. You weren't there, and you will never be. I can ask, pray and try to forget about it, but you just weren't there. When my mom and her abusive boyfriend were fighting, you weren't there. When I watched my uncle die from AIDS, you know, your boy, you weren't there. When we evacuated to Baton Rouge and grandma, who was the most diehard fan of the New Orleans Saints, took her last breath telling me to make her proud up above, you were not there. When I cried sometimes to my mother because I felt I needed to make her prouder, you weren't the one who told me that you will always be proud of me no matter what and that I was already making you proud, beyond expectations. Instead you came to my first grade graduation and clapped for me when they called my name, but you were looking at that woman who sat next to you.

I told myself if you ever went to prison, no matter how many letters you wrote, I would never write back. Well I'm writing back now. I opened the box under my bed and finally read your letters. I've learned from your letters that your favorite artist in music is Tupac. He made a song that had one line that pretty much sums up this letter in just five words. "I ain't mad at cha..."

LETTER ABOUT JEROME MORGAN

BY JANELL EASTERLING, ELEANOR MCMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

April 30, 2015

To whom it may concern:

I've had the pleasure and honor of being acquainted with Jerome Morgan for a year now. I use the words "pleasure" and "honor" with the most honesty. He is a soft-spoken, gentle, intellectual man. This is the exact opposite of what one might expect of a so-called "convicted felon."

Mosi Makori, a Students at the Center (SAC) co-director, used to work as an investigator with an organization called the Innocence Project. They work with those who are incarcerated that declare themselves innocent of the crime they were convicted of. Mosi shared Jerome's story with us in January of last year. The majority of us took a definite interest in it.

Jerome, like a typical teenager, went to a friend's birthday party in 1993. Someone opened fire during the festivities, and another teenager was murdered. Jerome believes he was the center of the police investigation because he fit the description of the shooter. Two witnesses also claimed Jerome was the murderer. Before he knew it, he was in prison at the age of seventeen.

After 20 long years, he was granted a new trial.

Jerome entered our SAC community a few days after he was allowed to go home while awaiting his new trial. Because I had never been around someone who was a convicted murderer (not even my cousin who was sentenced to 30 years), I found myself tensing up. When he went to speak about an essay that a student had read, I was shocked at how polished he was. He spoke as if he hadn't stepped foot inside of a prison. As time progressed and he visited more frequently, I became extremely comfortable around him.

Then, I was given the opportunity to work alongside him, SAC staff and the SAC students at McDonogh 35 High School over the summer. It turned out to be a huge success. I got the chance to see exactly how great of a writer Jerome really is.

My brothers are a few years younger than Jerome (36 and 35), which I think is one of the reasons I enjoy having him around. Also as I mentioned earlier, Jerome isn't a very vocal person, and that's a characteristic we both share. One thing I find interesting is that he seems to harbor peace, not anger, in his heart even after his whole ordeal, which isn't over yet.

If Jerome goes back to prison, it will be a huge blow to the hearts of many SAC students, including the juniors who just met him this school year.

RULES, CONTROL, PUNISHMENT, INCARCERATION BY JERAMIE PICHON, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

To further evaluate one's experience with rules, control, punishment, incarceration, or more or less justice, you must look at our own country's norms. In America, it and all of its residents have some type of experience with the law, incarceration, and the control aspect the government gives everyone. In our country's current situation we face and deal with reoccurring problems of police brutality and the Republican takeover. These problems alone deal with all of the following: rules (law), control (discipline), and punishment (incarceration), which in a way go hand in hand with each other with a few race injustices here and there. I could be wrong of course, but that's only opinion. What I'm really trying to say is that we, as Americans, find it almost normal to deal with these types of situations, and they can't always be avoided. No matter if it be you, a family member, or a friend you are connected to those situations in some way and affected by them. For example, someone such as your own father tried to bend the rules, but of course that back fired and now is incarcerated. That very situation connects to you and affects you mentally. You will always have a run-in with the law, no matter what, because normally most Americans don't know all the laws and their rights and with that fall the consequences that follow.

In my own experience I deal with, more or less, the control and incarceration aspect because my father was incarcerated and also the constant paranoia of how everything is a conspiracy and the government controls the average idiot American consumer and, not exactly, obedient citizens. It may all seem like some written farce, but it is absolutely true and there is no denying it. Going back to my situation, my dad wasn't always around, which is another norm of American society, just another absent father like most black American families, but that can't always be avoided. My dad was the type of man who always did what he wanted and didn't care

about too many things. From drugs and petty crimes with also the grief he gave me, my mom, and sister, he lived the lifestyle that New Orleans poverty allowed him to have. I only know this from things I heard and saw for my own eyes. As for the rest I can only put the pieces together as if it were some Greek myth about a hero or villain. For instance, my dad was, exaggerated to the extreme to make a point, the Greek hero Jason in my life. He went after the Golden Fleece, whatever seemed most appealing in his life in general, and once he got it that human characteristic of an unquenched thirst led him to his own doom. After impregnating my mom at a young age twice, he left and did whatever for him and himself only with us left behind. After a while the only love I had left for him was that he was my biological father and nothing else. Hearing that he was in and out of jail over the years and in a fatal accident didn't strike anything in my own heart, which was the day I lost my sympathy for others. My only strife after that was to figure out who I was and what I wanted in life which made me selfish and a bit cynical on accident. I often had a thought that our world and lifestyle was trivial and mundane but came to the conclusion that human life exists, our whole world, because we have the potential to become great, to do better, to break the laws of space and time, to spread love, and to do the impossible. This was my experience. This was my revelation. All the things I went through in life somehow all connected through my own father's incarceration and death and my realization of this. These effects are real and very much true, which brings me to reality.

The more knowledge I gain, the more reality sends a shock to each nerve of my brain and connects me on a different level of communication and understanding with others. Maybe that was me maturing, but who knows for sure. One realization after another I feel like the lifestyles we live today make all the strife we had over the ages meaningless. To me, personally, this is a generation of controlled intellect and violence. We may have grasped hold of a whole new level of human acceptance, but what does that all mean if we all have poor work ethics and commerce wars over a planet's resources we all share and owe our existence to. American government is a big contender in this because all Americans are people who scream freedom but still intently climb for a higher social status—almost as a freshman in high school who does something to stand out to gain popularity. One would say its low self-esteem or little confidence in oneself, but to me its lack of maturity, understanding, and a fact that an individual can only know about himself. This is no longer an experience about rules/laws, control/discipline, punishment/incarceration; it's about an experience of the world, or maybe it was always that.

“Keep moving forward, tackle life head on, never look back, and never give up,” all phrases to better yourself, to be a better individual. I hear many phrases to better and motivate an individual, but where are the phrases that better the world. We all experience the world as it is, but we also all lack the understanding of it. Simply perception is all it is, the major factor of how we see things. We all have our own individual perception, which is why we don't always see things the same way, which leads to a bit of disagreement. If we all had the same experience and perception of things, would rules/laws, control/discipline, punishment/incarceration even exist? That's only fantasy though; we must face reality and cope with the world. To me the only hope that's left for us is Unity, Understanding, and Love. Those are the only things that can help us overcome our thousands of years of strife.

I don't say this out of nonsense but from the knowledge I gained and to make a point. I simply mean to say there are ways to better our world, but we all have to want it. Human logic and laws to better us and keep us safe somehow affect us later down the road because it's not all the way thought through in a sense like the American government. Our Democracy will go through more changes over the next hundred years because its constantly trying to be so-called “perfected,” but to me it's still an idea for a decent government or of a more hidden and elaborate plan for control. Actually paying attention to politics, seeing the greater picture for the world, gaining knowledge, watching news programs, and finding interest in organizations that want a world full of truth and peace, such as the organization “Anonymous,” I feel as though lack of experience and

understanding don't really matter because our world is full of trial and error. That's almost the point though. That's our experience to basically learn from mistakes. We simply get our understanding from that experience. It all seems confusing in a way I put it, but this is my experience of the world of my seventeen years of life, and there's only more to come. I don't want to be burdened by past experiences and elaborating on them, besides the fact of learning from them, but I want to understand all my gained experiences and utilize them for myself and the greater good.

MY BLACK COMMUNITY

BY TIAONA TORREGANO, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

Being raised in a black community like the Laffite was somewhat complicated for me; there were advantages and disadvantages of living in a threatening environment. I've learned valuable things like how to keep a strong mindset when dealing with troublesome situations. The majority of the children I grew up with were being raised by single mothers who struggled to take care of them because their biological father wasn't a part of their lives. Most men in the area were in devastating situations, facing incarceration because of gun charges, drugs, murder, and other criminal activities. The single mothers would often have to face many obstacles raising a child with the father absent.

An article titled "Prison's Long Reach into America's Classrooms" by Katy Reckdahl is about the life of children who grew up with incarcerated parents. It tells the story of a man named Steven Alexander whose mother was sentenced when he was a child. The article focuses on child abandonment with different situations but proves that children need their parents through life. Reckdahl says, "When a parent is incarcerated, a child's future becomes collateral damage." I agree because without biological parents, children tend to give up on everything, including life. Katy Reckdahl says, "Their schoolwork suffered almost immediately without their mother, who had been strict, especially about school." This displays how his mother had strict parenting before being incarcerated. Reckdahl says, "None of the children finished high school. Almost all struggled with addiction. Steven's older brother Stanton got into constant fights. His little sister, Sandria, was taunted by classmates." Not having a mother caused them to go down the wrong path in life. I think this is a clear example of what happens when the system takes a parent out of a black home.

I felt sympathy for the children who were being forced to endure in the selfishness of society, their parents, and the community itself. For children in families with a parent lost to prison seem forced into making choices that require them to take the adult roles that may be damaging to their social and emotional development. One of my closest friend's father was killed during a drug trade, and she used to tell me how difficult it was for her family: how she was forced to work because her mother wasn't financially stable. Her mother had to work two jobs to support her family, so she couldn't monitor her children like she used to. My friend's brother was incarcerated a few years after her father's death. Not having anyone to confide in but me kind of helped her get through the struggle. Just to think that all of this occurred because of the absence of her father. I listened to her complicated situation and just thought how lucky I was to have both my parents in my life.

"The Swinging Doors" by Tareian King, a former SAC student whose writing we studied in my Bard College course with Students at the Center, is an essay about a young girl who witnessed her father being sentenced to prison. King puts so much emotion into the essay when describing her life without her father. The beginning of the paper stresses how hateful and judgmental people are when seeing King volunteer in a courtroom. King says, "If only they knew that I sat in those same seats, and waited to see what the judge would say about my daddy. If only they knew, I had gone through the same thing. They looked at me as if they despised me." When King gets into the courtroom, she is reminded of the day that her father was sentenced. Tareian King says,

“This is where the long prison sentences come in at. The sad thing is while the system looks at humans who make mistakes as criminals as moneymakers, you have children who are missing their loved ones.” I think that King’s essay is a perfect sample of how children feel when a loved one is taken away from them. She gives a clear description of how the absence of her father affected her.

Children are left to fend for themselves emotionally and are stressed because a loved one is sentenced to prison. Children tend to experience confused feelings and behavior upon their parent’s incarceration, and older children display more behavior problems, speech issues, and learning disabilities. Most kids stop attending school and feel embarrassment when announcing their parent went to prison. When looking at other children and their families, children feel unwanted and neglected. Even though every child reacts differently to their parent’s incarceration, I feel like the majority blame themselves into thinking that it’s their fault.

Another essay that demonstrates how incarceration affects children is “From the River to the Lake” by Jerome Morgan. Morgan shares with his readers a personal essay about his life before prison time in Angola. He expresses his innocence and how he ended up in one of the most treacherous places in the United States. Morgan says, “A large part of the reason why I was so vulnerable to the suffering of such an unjust imprisonment was due to my upbringing. I’d been raised in a foster care since the tender age of three all the way up until being incarcerated.” I believe that Jerome is another example of children whose parents are absent in their lives. Morgan followed in his parents’ footsteps because he had no one to confide in and encourage him. His life is different from Tareian King’s because instead of being incarcerated like her father, she learned from him and got an education. Morgan also says, “Nonetheless, I didn’t get opportunity to meet my dad or my mom’s only brother until I was sixteen and seventeen years of age, when they both were released from Angola on separate charges. Unfortunately, a couple months prior to me meeting my father, my mom was also incarcerated.” His parents never were in his life to navigate him through trouble, so Jerome ended up just like them.

Overall, growing up with children whose parents were incarcerated kind of caused me to be thankful. I know that feeling of not being able to be with a loved one because they were taken away from you. Even though my parents raised me separately, I still felt like the children who didn’t have both parents. Being a part of my community played a major part in my life because I learned from those who surrounded me. I learned how to move forward during complicated situations, like living with one parent and how to take control of my family when my mother was too busy to. What made it easier was the fact that I wasn’t alone when taking on responsibilities during difficult times. Most of the children who lived in the Lafitte Housing Development with me shared some kind of obstacle that they were trying to overcome, for example incarceration, separation, and abandonment. I feel like the system doesn’t care about what they do to families and how it affects them. I hope that in the future the system develops a healthier plan that involves not separating but supporting children with incarcerated parents.

DISOBEYING HIS LAW

BY TINA TRAN, ELEANOR MCMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

In my early childhood, I was still in 1st grade, my brother and I along with other students within the grade of kindergarten to 8th grade went to an after school tutoring class that took place on church grounds. There were two teachers, Co Mai (Mrs. Mai) and Thay Fair (Mr. Fair). Co Mai would take kindergarten through 1st grade, while Thay Fair would take the rest.

The three years with Co Mai were wonderful to me. I was eager to go to after-school tutoring. She was the kind of lady who always helps every kid with words and teaches them over the subject if they got it wrong. Since it was my last year with her, my brother often teased me about his tutor, Thay Fair. I always heard of

Thay Fair's class that was behind Co Mai's. It was opposite from Co Mai's. In her class we could speak and color in coloring books, the atmosphere felt lively. On the other hand from the rumors I heard, Thay Fair didn't allow anyone to talk to each other. He would yell if you did something wrong. At first I didn't think it would be that bad, until I went to 2nd grade.

The first time I stepped in his class was awkward. I had no idea what to do, and I didn't want to ask. So I followed the other children and sat down in the desk. He spoke in Vietnamese about the instructions and how his class functions. Then he translated to English. I could tell this man wasn't nice; he had a stern face every time I looked at him. I always avoided his eyes, fearing that he would yell at me for not doing my work. Looking behind me, on the other side of the room, I can still remember what it was like to be in Co Mai's class, but I knew I couldn't go back because I was growing older and had to be responsible for my own assignments in this class. There was punishment and a reward in his class. The punishment, if you got something wrong, he would hit your hand with a pencil. As for the reward, you didn't need to worry about him yelling at you. Luckily for me, I was an A student during the time, so I hadn't felt physical pain from this man. Not yet at least.

One day, in Thay Fair's class, I just sat in class doing nothing because I didn't have homework that day. I looked over to my friend who had the same teacher as me in school doing her homework. I leaned over her asking why she was doing homework, since we didn't have any. She replied that we had to do something for Thay Fair to see in order to get out of class. I didn't see any sense in her comment. Why should I do homework that I have already done the previous day? The reason for this class was to complete our assignments, and I already had. I went by my own rule to just sit until the hour was up. Once it was time to go, he called a few students to stay behind, including me. We all lined up beside him, and he talked to each of us. To this day, I still feel the sting on my cheek. He slapped me across the face, and I fell out of balance and hit the floor. As I got up, I couldn't hear what he said over my rapid heartbeat. I knew he was angry at me for not doing anything in class. When I finally faced him eye to eye, I could see the anger he had. He asked me if I knew why he slapped me. I replied with a nod. By then I was crying, sucking up all my tears not wanting to show I was weak to this man. I had been hit a lot in my childhood by my parents, but this slap hurt most of all. Everyone stared at me crying, most likely pitying me, since I was still "new." I had never seen anyone get physically hit by him other than a pencil hitting the hand. I'm guessing I was the first young one to receive this punishment. He told me go back and finish my so-called "homework." I went back and sat in the chair scribbling down meaningless words. I was sobbing, trying to keep myself quiet. It wasn't quiet enough for him. So he got up and walked towards me. Fear arose in my body as I tried to scribble faster. Next thing I knew he kicked my chair, yelling at me to quiet down.

I was trembling in fear, but within me I felt furious. I wasn't crying because of the pain, but the anger I had with this so-called "teacher." I always wondered what I had done wrong to deserve this type of punishment. I don't know when or how, but I had realized something about his class. It was his own law or sort of rule to not let anyone slack off. But most important, he wanted to show he's the one with power, and the students cannot say anything back. Similar to dictatorship, everyone in that class was confined with his ludicrous law. Even though he helped students with their assignments, to me he was the ruler of the class whom no one dared go against. They saw me as an example to follow his rule. After that dreadful day, for the following year I did my assignments even if I hadn't received one. When I showed him my assignment, as he checked over it with that same straight face, I stared at him waiting for his comments. He handed me back my paper saying, "Good job."

MISTAKE

BY TOI SMITH, ELEANOR McMMAIN SECONDARY SCHOOL

September 3, 2014 had to be one of the worst days of my life. This was the day my mom and dad took my brother into police custody. Who knew that his face would be broadcast all over the news because of an honest mistake? This was something that nobody could have ever prepared me for: the constant criticism of people saying he deserves to die. I often wonder how they would feel if it was someone related to them receiving death threats.

According to the news my brother is a criminal. According to some people he's a murderer. According to me he's a wonderful brother. I couldn't have asked for someone better. Growing up he always did his best to take care of his little sisters. He was the oldest, so we often went to him for everything. For me to hear the things that people say about him, I sometimes think "how would they feel if they were in his shoes?" It amazes me how one mistake can cause people to take it upon themselves to become God. Who are you to say someone deserves to rot in hell? Who are you to say he deserves life in prison?

My deepest condolences go out to the family of Daphne Cola. I think about them from time to time. I often wonder how they would feel if the roles were switched. Maybe they would be able to see things from my point of view. The way they view my brother offends me. They look at my brother as though he is some type of killer. People make mistakes every day, and this is one he'll live with for the rest of his life whether or not people believe it. I know for a fact he thinks about this scenario every day and every night. I know he's sorry! I know he wishes he could go back and do something different! Yet there are people out here saying he deserves to rot in prison. What if the roles were switched? What if this was one of their family members going through this? People rarely think about it though.

I can recall the news broadcasting "ATV hit and run leaves mother of two in coma." The videos, the pictures, the comments: everything plays vividly in my mind. Things happen so fast, and I know for a fact he wishes he could go back in time and maybe just maybe dodge this lady. The video footage was as clear as ever. You can see my brother flip and the four wheeler crashes. He gets up to check on the lady. A man he did not know tells him to leave the scene because this was a family-owned bar. My mom and dad took him to talk to a lawyer the next day, and the lawyer said to not turn himself in because that would make him guilty. He has been to court a few times, even though I haven't been present at any. Everyone tells me everything is going good.

I personally believe my mom and dad would rather I not come to any court dates. Every time I ask or offer to come they hit me with excuse after excuse. I haven't been to visit my brother. Who wants to see someone they love shackled up, when I know for a fact he isn't this type of person? He writes me and calls every day. Every time he calls we have a different story to tell him about my nephews. It's crazy how I can relate to almost anyone with the situation my brother is in. It's almost like I've taken a walk in another person's shoes.

This semester in my Students at the Center class we've gone over several readings that remind of my brother's situation. One of those readings is "Putting Down The Gun." In "Putting Down The Gun," an essay written by Rebecca Walker, she discusses an after-school conversation with her 11-year-old son. Her son said that he wanted to play a sport because that was the only way he would get noticed by females. I can relate this to my brother's situation. Before any of this even happened he was always looked at as the good boy. Nobody would think to say he was a criminal. He has never committed a crime. All he ever did was play sports and aim to make our parents proud. Now people we don't even know have their own personal opinions to voice on the situation.

Similar to “Putting Down The Gun,” John Edgar Wideman’s book *Brothers and Keepers* discusses Wideman’s dealing with everyday ridicule of his brother. He discusses the different situations and emotions he went through leading up to the arrest of his younger brother, Robby. Wideman reminisces about his childhood days with his family. He talks about the days when his baby brother was just that, his baby brother. No label, no record, and most definitely not being broadcast all over the news. This is similar to how I think of my brother. Before all of this happened no one could say anything bad about him. Now that this has happened everyone thinks that they know him. Wideman had this weird feeling and soon realized that Robby was on his way to visit him. August 5, 2014, I had this eerie feeling all night. Something was going on. Something that nobody wanted me to know about. It was as if I was out of the loop while everyone else knew what was going on. I would soon find out that my brother was a wanted man. Prior to him turning himself in he wanted to spend every breathing moment with us. In relation to the book *Brothers and Keepers* I want to say that my brother being broadcast all over the news stations never once changed my opinion and perspective of him. He remained and still remains my hero.

“Just Walk On By,” an essay written by Brent Staples, discusses how black males are looked at as criminals even before people can actually get to know them. This pretty much sums up how people see boys who ride four wheelers and dirt bikes. They always believe that something is stolen. Why can’t this just be an average teen or man riding something that belongs to him because he enjoys it? Everyone’s first impression is criminal or thief, when in reality these boys are far from that. They all work or go to school. They just like riding. Towards the end of his essay Staples writes about how he takes precautions to make himself less threatening. I would never want my brother to do this. It doesn’t matter to me, to him, to us whether or not he appears dangerous to you because he rides an ATV. When he gets out and says that he wants a new four wheeler, he will get him one! It doesn’t matter how people feel in my opinion. People will always talk whether you doing good or bad. At this point I can honestly say I don’t care how anyone feels about my brother. If he wants another four wheeler, that’s what he will get.

In school I’m often judged to be bad. Just because I’m bad, people automatically assume that my grades and what not must be screwed up. When they get a look at my power school—an online grade book where students can check on their grades—they’re in for a rude awakening because I make sure that my grades stay above average. It’s crazy to me how people always judge books by their covers before actually reading them. You can say what you want to about me. I know what I am capable of. I can relate to my brother in more ways than one because I’ve been in his shoes multiple times at school. Once you get one suspension people label you as bad and forget about all of the good you’ve done. This kills me slowly because you can slip up and make one little mistake, and people will never let it simmer down.

HEY BRO’!

BY EDELMY MARIN, MCDONOGH 35 HIGH SCHOOL

Why is it that jail is often feared by some, despised by many, and inhabited by many more? Where does this issue come from? How is it developed?

Poverty is all I think about when I question myself about this. And it is not merely about money or wealth gaps or inequitable funding for public schools, even though I must say that the economic system is part of our problem.

You might be asking yourself, what does all this have to do with me? I, an immigrant in the United States shouldn’t be worrying about major problems in this country, for I can simply leave everything behind and

forget about the problems in America. But I cannot. I am not capable of doing so, because that is just another way to silence me.

And I won't stay quiet.

Take my words written or typed as my verbal words, for they will ever be what my mind thinks.

I can't and won't silence myself because I have something else in this country, my family. That is why whatever happens in your country, America, matters to me, for it matters to my brother; it matters to my mother; it matters to my uncles, to my cousins; and so it does for me. It matters to me because if my mother's house burns to the ground, my brother, a U. S. citizen, won't have a place to stay.

A place to stay is what I need sometimes, not because I am homeless, but because I fear the place where I live. There are no ghosts at home, or "the place where I live," but I fear my life every time I am there. Perhaps I fear my entire neighborhood, where drugs are sold like candy, vandals exist in abundance, and bullets rain randomly.

Randomly, I wonder if my brother has that same fear. I mean, a seven-year-old boy shouldn't be thinking about getting shot on the streets. But at nights, he hears bullets blasting over and over. I always count them. I wonder if he does. He is usually with my mother in their room when events like this happen. I guess she must cover his ears, if not talk to him about the worship songs they always play in the DVD. They are so connected, but sometimes, randomly, he turns out and asks about his daddy. And he breaks my mother's heart.

With her heart broken, my mother must keep her tears from falling out of her eyes. I also wonder what does she tell him. What can she say, if she still doesn't know what to say to explain why is it that her ex-boyfriend, my brother's "daddy," left us a year ago, after living with him for three years? His dad simply left him one day and never returned. And today, I still feel him asking himself when he will see his dad again.

Sometimes I feel my mother's torment when this kind of question comes up at home. What can she tell him, if she doesn't know? She doesn't know where your daddy is, bro'. She doesn't know where your father is either. One day they took him, after someone called them and said he was beating mom up just after having you. She can't tell you this either, even though she knows. He must be in hell, somewhere here on this earth.

I wish you would stop asking all this. You don't need to know just yet. Can you wait? Just wait at least until you make 18. I know you can do it, for I did so as well, but I still don't know who my father is. I know your pain because I have asked for my father as well, and she doesn't know what to tell me either. She just cries; not like you, for not knowing, perhaps, she cries because of what she knows, and what she felt, and what she still feels....

When I see her eyes, I see her pain; and it is that same pain what makes me stop asking because I have lived better off without knowing. And sometimes that is better, for there are certain truths that hurt even more.

I wonder what he felt, what he feels for knowing the truth about his father. He, our neighbor—the boy we always see at the bus stop in the morning. The same child whose father never came back to walk him to the bus stop in the morning, and now that child sees other fathers with their kids on the same corner waiting. I bet his father wasn't waiting for the bullets to trespass his chest when he was there, on the corner, on the next block waiting for thugs to come and buy candy to get high, for his children needed to eat candy, and eat, too.

I know you are still a kid, but I know you have feelings bro'. And I know you are intelligent and mature for your age, even though mom protects you from developing your maturity. I know you know, or at least you might imagine how Chris, our neighbor, feels about his father. You know what it means to lose a father; perhaps, you have lost two. His father is gone... forever. Fortunately, Chris still has her, his mother, who will

eventually raise him, just like mom is doing with us. We are fortunate bro', even though you might not see it that way, but we are. The ones who are not too fortunate are mothers like ours; for their pain is doubled when they see us cry or simply ask for our fathers, and when they realize that their support is gone. Their love, mate, husband, boyfriend, soul mate... is gone....

That was the only way for him; selling candies for thugs was the only thing he could do after they caught him selling when he was a teenager. He couldn't work because they sent him to hell, and kept him there, not for so long though. He came out in a matter of months; that was completely unnecessary. Can you believe that one day was enough for him to have a record? After that happened, the father of our neighbor became part "of an uncounted population of formerly convicted or incarcerated people trying to find work in a hostile economy." He couldn't work because of what he did to "get his record," and based on a study cited by EEOC in 2010, 92% of employers in the country are running background checks. (Wright) What role does this country in which we live and its rules and its incarceration practices and prejudices and...have in the death of Chris's father?

I wonder what will happen with this boy. Bro' I was looking at a website about fathers a few days ago, and guess what they say? According to the website: There are more and more fatherhood conferences shooting up across America, and one conference in California sponsored by www.streetpositive.com indicates the following 10 points:

1. Over 30 million children in the U. S. do not have a father living with them and over 1/3 will not see their father at all in the next twelve months.
2. Ninety percent of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes.
3. Over 71% of high school dropouts are from fatherless homes.
4. Young children growing up without father's involvement are ten times more likely to be extremely poor.
5. There are 20 million children living in single-parent households.
6. Sixty-three percent of youth committing suicides come from fatherless homes.
7. Of all the children that exhibit behavior disorders, 85% come from fatherless homes.
8. The majority of teen mothers come from homes without fathers.
9. Seventy percent of the juveniles in state-operated institutions come from fatherless homes.
10. And if you examine the prison population, 85% of all youth sitting in prison grew up in a fatherless home.

From "Fathers Helping Fathers."

He will not see his father ever again. It is hard to say that he will become homeless because you see how our mom has worked for us; she would never allow that to happen to any of us, but I don't know about his relationship with his mother. I see many others like him, well I saw, because some of them really drop out of school. We are just like him and the other 19.9 million of children in the U.S. living with a single parent; do you see bro'? We are not alone. We are many, but we would be better off with our fathers at home, and not in jail, hell, or underground. We really need our fathers.

But we have our mothers... and we are all our mothers have.

I remember Jay, someone in my Students at the Center (SAC) class. Well, he wasn't really in my class, but he was part of SAC. I remember his story, even though he never revealed anything to us. Always quiet, staring at something, still, while he listened. He didn't drop out of high school though; instead he went to college, that

same college I really want to go to. I know he grew up without his father. They also threw him in hell for a crime he didn't commit. His father spent the same amount of years he has of living, in jail, or hell.

Fortunately, he, the boy in SAC, met the father who would "adopt" him, and even though they stole all those awesome stories that only boys can share with their daddies, they were fortunate enough to see each other again. They let his father "out" of hell, after so many years of fighting his case, and put him under home arrest. I mean that was better. At least they know he is innocent. Well, they always knew he was; they just needed someone black, another father of our brothers in struggle, to fill out a place in their enterprise—that enterprise where they don't pay those who work, other than the keepers. They earned more from him because he was "paying," and they will continue earning because he ended up not being free, even if he is out of the joint. He is not able to earn what he could work for because he is "boxed in." His "criminal" record will probably keep him unemployed for life.

This is a lifelong war, bro'.

Hey bro', did you know that that is part of what incarceration does? Bro' we must strive to keep ourselves out of these horrible statistics. That's why I tell you to study every day because this society doesn't want us to succeed. Those who are in power, want to remain in power; and because we represent power in struggle, for our ancestors fought against theirs, and we are still here. This is a lifelong war bro'. They know they haven't defeated us, for we are still here fighting to keep on going and come out of the hole they have been trying to keep us in.

They expect you to be like our neighbor's father. That's why we can't let them see us fail bro'; I know we won't let them. That's why they don't want to keep the patrimony left to us by our ancestors—those people who fought for us to have public schools be open for us. They want to close our schools. They want to make us learn what they think we should learn; they want us to believe we were always stupid, dumb, monkeys. They don't want us to know that our people fought them in the past, and defeated them. They are scared, for they know we can do it again. We are getting tired of them, but some of us find the "easiest way" to forget that they are messing over us. Some of us use drugs because it causes us not to see, or feel, the pain they have made us feel. That is what they want bro'; let's prove them wrong. Let's continue with the fight, our people won a battle once, but this war is still going on.

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THE STRUGGLE

**STORIES, CORRESPONDENCE, AND DOCUMENTS LEADING TO THE
EXONERATION OF JEROME MORGAN**

TESTIMONY

BY AERYN BATISTE

I met Jerome Morgan via mutual friends of us both (Rommel & Shannon Johnson) in late 2001 or early 2002. Shannon shared with me the misfortune and wrongful conviction of her then fiancé's best friend back in 1993. She had explained the story as Rommel had explained it to her. I remember feeling like that was so "messed up." For the next few days or weeks (not sure the exact time frame), Jerome's story would haunt my thoughts and I really wanted to help him. After much contemplation of his true innocence I had a haunting nightmare of the night of the Sweet Sixteen Party. In this nightmare I could vividly see the scene as it had been told to me. I as well saw, who I assume was Jerome, wrapping his own shirt around the wound of a gunshot victim after just cowering under a table during the gun fire. From this moment I knew I had to do something. My first act was to contact Jerome and seek his permission to help in any menial way that I could. With Rommel's assistance I mailed Jerome a letter explaining who I was and how his story had touched me. He immediately responded "joyfully," grateful for any assistance.

I then received a transcript of the entire case from Jerome and began reading it compulsively. The facts there convinced me even more of this man's innocence and I could not comprehend how he was convicted to begin with. At that time I had no legal training in any manner but could still not miss the inconsistencies of the case and knew without doubt that Jerome Morgan was in fact innocent and wrongfully convicted.

After visiting with Jerome and receiving his permission, I began to contact, via phone and visiting, several attorneys in the Metro area. Rommel, Shannon and Jeffrey accompanied me to many of these attorney visits. More often than not, the attorney showed interest in the case. However, the retainers in the amount of ten thousand plus dollars disabled us from pursuing anything of merit with any attorney willing to take on the challenge of Jerome's wrongful conviction.

After we had dozens of consultations with attorneys and paralegals, Jerome suggested the Innocence Project of New Orleans. I contacted the Project several times and could never reach anyone. Finally a breakthrough happened when an attorney, I believe a Mr. Parks, found the case of interest and agreed to meet with me. From there I had turned over all the court transcripts of Mr. Morgan's with the hope that this would be it! This all happened in the spring of 2002. After numerous visits and phone consultations we hit a dead end. The Project, at that time, was more focused on DNA exonerations. In Jerome's case, there was no DNA or any other physical evidence to either convict him or prove him innocent. The case was dormant for many years and each time I called I was never told any affirming news. I grew discouraged as time passed while still believing in his innocence and that at some point, hopefully, this huge wrong would be made right. However, at this point hope was all we worked with until an investigator gained more ground than any of us could have ever imagined!

JUSTICE

BY SHANNON ELLIS JOHNSON

It all begins and ends with LOVE... My name is Shannon Ellis Johnson and I was only twenty years old when I met the love of my life in late 2000, Mr. Rommel Johnson. We often explored each other's minds by sharing the highs and lows that life dealt us. Among many stories, there was only one story that hit me like a pile of bricks. I was floored when I learned Jerome Morgan's story. Rommel explained the story about his best friend's innocence in depth and that he was sitting in prison with a life sentence. He expressed that his attendance at that Sweet Sixteen Party was one of the worst nights of his life. I felt like I was in a trance as I shook my

head “no” with a look of confusion, shock and disbelief. Yes, I said it, disbelief. Being that I am a very forward person, with all due respect; I asked Rommel the question that most would avoid. “Well, is Jerome really innocent?” “How are you sure?” Rommel replied in a stern tone, “because he was on the floor with me.” This naive came from growing up near sighted and believing only what I seen through those rose tinted glasses.

The pain in Rommel’s heart as he recreated this night was unbearable to me. Also, the knowing of my husband’s loved one’s wrongful conviction to life in prison did not sit well. When I had the pleasure to meet this beautiful soul, I was captivated by his intellect, hope, love and positive attitude. His aura was ground shaking. I had no clue what I could do to help him but there was a fire burning inside of me that I could not extinguish. I wanted to share Jerome’s story with any human being that would listen. I first decided to give awareness through discussions about our tainted justice system, the negative effect it has on our communities and how we allow the system to take innocent lives by turning a blind eye. My discussions caught the attention of one of my best friends, Aeryn Davis. Aeryn has been a driving force in many efforts to prove Jerome’s innocence. Our determined group consisted of Rommel, myself, Aeryn and Jeffery Jackson (best friend of Jerome and Rommel). We visited with many lawyers only to be halted because they proposed outrageous legal fees. Until one day Jerome suggested that we contact the Innocence Project which was an important key after many years of waiting.

Thanks to The Innocence Project of New Orleans, Jerome was given the opportunity to unveil the truth. Ten years later, the excitement heightened as Jerome’s hearing date approached. In almost disbelief, I contacted Aeryn to share the wonderful news. Last, as we all learned that his conviction was overturned and a new trial was granted, the expressions of joy we shared are indescribable. Jerome was released into Love. We were all pulled together by a powerful force all streaming from the love of God in each and every person who took part in this success. God’s love connected all of us in love for a greater purpose. This greater purpose was created even without our knowledge of any participation of a job so big. God’s love is perpetual!

ANY DAY NOW BY JEROME MORGAN

February, 2015

On Friday morning, January 17, 2014, the Honorable Judge Darryl Derbigny ruled according to the law. He overturned my conviction, and set the matter for a new trial. This decision was based on very strong evidence that (in 1993) police officers convinced and coerced two teenagers into falsely identifying me, along with evidence (call log records) that the then prosecutor hid which would have proved I could never have managed to “escape the scene while being chased, hop a fence, stash a gun and return to the scene six minutes before the police arrived, without being noticed...”

Per the Court Record:

-01/17/2014

ALPHONSEC

>THE DEFENDANT, JEROME MORGAN APPEARED FOR FILING OF WRITS WITH
COUNSEL, KRISTIN WENSTROM >BOND HEARING SET FOR 01/23/14 IN
SECTION J . >THE COURT FINDS MERIT IN THE DEFENDANTS POST
CONVICTION APPLICATION. >ACCORDINGLY, COURT GRANTS NEW TRIAL.

>CONVICTION 2ND DEGREE (M)URDER OF CLARENCE LANDRY IS VACATED.
>COURT WILL PLACE WRITTEN REASON IN RECORD. >THE COURT NOTED
HE STATES INTENTION TO SEEK WRIT. >THE COURT ORDER THAT THE
DEFENDANT IS TO “REMAIN” IN THE CUSTODY OF THE ORLEANS PARISH
SHERIFF UNTIL HIS NEXT APPEARANCE. >THE COURT FILED THE ORDER.
>THE STATE FILED NOTICE OF INTENT TO FILE A WRIT.THIS WAS FORWARD
TO THE CLERK OF SECTION “J” TO BE PLACED IN THE DEFENDANT’S CASE.
>THE ORDER ON THE POST CONVICTION WAS FILED IN OPEN COURT, AND
FORWARD TO THE CLERK OF SECTION “J” TO BE PLACED IN CASE.
>NOTIFY DEF.COUNSEL. >PDOJL
>THE DEFENDANT, JEROME MORGAN APPEARED FOR STATUS HEARING WITH
COUNSEL, KRISTIN WENSTROM >BOND HEARING SET FOR 01/23/14 IN
SECTION J . >NOTIFY DEF.COUNSEL. >PDOJL

All the while, I was still caught up in what just happened. As the moment froze in time I’m thinking to myself, Judge Derbigny really did grant me the justice I’ve been praying for, and working towards, since that day the NOPD wrongfully shackled me at 17 years old. I can’t believe it! During the proceedings, I had an internal tug of war, my soul overjoyed about being vindicated while still wondering when I would have my actual release from Angola State Prison (Plantation) and its overcrowded hell chamber the Orleans Parish Jail.

On the other hand the Assistant District Attorney, litigating on behalf of the state, voiced his intent to file a writ of appeal, arguing to the Court of Appeals and the Louisiana Supreme Court that Judge Derbigny’s ruling should be overruled and reversed. In the meantime, my attorney requested a bond hearing by submitting a motion for bond reduction. For the hearing we were prepared to present my plan for a fresh start. Many people came to show support including the person I would be staying with in Pontchartrain Park (aka The Park) and a Master Barber. The Barber came because I plan to do on the job training as a barber apprentice, until I obtain my barbering license, for a craft that I had been practicing for 20 years while in Angola.

Per the Court Record:

-01/23/2014

GEORGEM

>THE DEFENDANT, JEROME MORGAN APPEARED FOR HEARING ON MOTIONS
BOND HEARING, WITH COUNSELS, KRISTIN WENSTROM, EMILY MAW AND
JOHN WILLIAMS. >ADA MATTHEW KIRKHAM APPEARED AND REPRESENTED
THE STATE. >DEFENSE CALLED: JEFFREY JACKSON JUDY DEMAREST
JONATHAN MORGAN >AFTER ARGUMENT, STATE AND DEFENSE SUBMITTED
THE MATTER. *THE STATE MUST TENDERED A RESPONSE TO THE DEFENSE
MOTIONS ON 1/27/14.

02/03/2014

GEORGEM

>THE DEFENDANT, JEROME MORGAN APPEARED FOR RULING WITH COUNSEL, RULING WITH COUNSELS, KRISTIN WENSTROM & EMILY MAW. ADA MATTHEW KIRKHAM APPEARED AND REPRESENTED THE STATE. -THE COURT GRANTED THE DEFENSE WRITTEN MOTION FOR REDUCTION OF BOND. -THE COURT NOTED THE OBJECTION BY THE STATE. *BOND IS SET AT \$25,000.00- CASH, PROPERTY OR COMMERCIAL SURETY. THE COURT PREPARED BAIL ORDER # 19431. *THE STATE FILED: -NOTICE OF INTENT TO FILE A WRIT---GRANTED. -MOTION AND ORDER FOR STAY ORDER----DENIED. THE COURT NOTED THE OBJECTION BY THE STATE. *THE COURT IMPOSED THE FOLOWING CONDITION TO THE REDUCED BOND: -HOME INCARCERATION. -WEEKLY DRUG TESTING. THE DEFENSE PREPARED EMP FORM # 771. >FILING OF WRITS SET FOR 02/28/14 >SEND NOTICE TO DEFENSE COUNSELS. >DNOC.

We planned, going into the Bond Hearing, to use a property bond with one of my cousins' properties as collateral for my release. We thought a property bond would get me released without having to come up with cash that none of my loved-ones could afford to lose. But it was difficult because there were many hoops to jump through, like appraising the properties. In one day we raised money to place a cash surety bond to get me the hell up outta there! Nonetheless, the Judge's orders left the bond conditions up to interpretation.

I was a nervous wreck from the time the judge granted the bond reduction that prior morning, until I was finally called to be released. "Jerome Morgan, pack ya' shit...you rollin' out," said the young deputy sheriff early that February morning. I didn't dare act surprised, but my elated soul was glowing with delight! I was really finally getting out of prison! All the guys gave me their farewells like captives hoping to one day be rescued and led into redemption. I could still hear and feel the thoughts of the guys back in Angola wishing me well, when I left there for good at 5am, January 17th, on the day the conviction was thrown out. The young OPP deputy, who became more familiar with my case over the last 27 months, also gave his farewell.

Set to roll out, I was kept in a large stinky holding cell all morning. There were two other guys processing out as well that morning, but by evening they were gone. Next I was called into a back area with three bathroom stalls to change from prison jumpsuit into your own clothes, the clothes you wore when you were arrested. Of course, the deputy behind the thick glass window who retrieved prisoners' personal clothes could not find any clothes belonging to me. Then he asked, "What size do you wear?" I wasn't really sure because the Angola sizes I'd been wearing for 20 years are so irregular. Nonetheless, he was able to find me a gray oversized used undershirt and a pair of gray cargo trousers that weren't pants, but too long to be considered as a pair of shorts...

I ended up seeing my first air of the outside world at 6pm. That very first air minus the handcuffs and shackles, took place as I was processed out of the Electronic Monitoring Program's (EMP) office on Dupre Street. Instead of the metal handcuffs and shackles, I now wore a waterproof electric monitoring ankle bracelet. The

only things I carried with me were an electric cord to charge the electronic shackle for two uninterrupted hours each day, my most recent casework, a couple personal mail items I received recently, and a few photos that I had all in one plastic bag. Everything else, a bunch of journals, writings, Xerox-copied books, photos, and personal letters from loved-ones dating back to 1996, I left with a friend in Angola until further notice. Whatever else I had I gave away.

Once I walked out of the EMP office doors, I was met by one of my attorneys, who gave me a very warm and welcoming embrace. Then the others started to pour in on Dupre Street, once given the news that I was finally being released. My attorneys, office staff, several of my family and friends all were there to greet me. Each of us was taking in the moment, hugging, kissing, and emoting tears of joy. After many hugs and kisses, in the back of one of the attorneys' car I changed into the blue and white striped polo shirt, blue Levi's jeans, and Van's sneakers, that my loved-ones had brought for me. I changed boxers, socks and everything right there on Dupre St. Then I threw the other clothes into the garbage. After taking photos, talking, and laughing, I loaded into my cousin's very nice, and roomy, black Cadillac truck for the ride home. Home! Wow! Our destination was my childhood potnuh's (true friend) house in Pontchartrain Park, which would be a good residence during this crucial period of reentry/ reintegration/ transition/ restoration/ healing/ adaptation/re-enfranchisement.

Riding home, the night was as smooth as I had always remembered. No ordinary prisoner was permitted many opportunities to be out at night. So not to be imprisoned under the night sky was definitely precious to me. Three carloads full, our first stop was a gas station on Chef & Louisa St. Yeah, I knew where I was of course, but the feeling was so damn long overdue! Plus, a lot wasn't as familiar, like the construction of a Wal-Mart taking up the Gentilly Woods Mall space, and these Arab-owned stores on all three corners from the bank. Popeye's, McDonald's, Rally's, Burger King, and The Daiquiri Shop—all those places had been there for 21-22 years, at least. Now they have these gas stations, a real hoodie strip mall, with a Brother's, Beauty Mart, and a washateria (laundromat). There's an Athletes' Foot, Waffle House, Taco Bell, Wendy's, Winn Dixie, Soul Train Fashion, Citi Trends, and a whole bunch of other stores that were not present in 1993.

One of my other childhood potnuh's went to get the Popeye's' chicken. Yes, I asked for Popeye's. Trust and believe. I know out of all the delicious food in the world there is to eat, wanting New Orleans famous fried chicken might sound ignant' to some conscious folks. But, if you ate Angola food for years and watch prisoners eat raw snake you'll be craving New Orleans famous fried chicken, also. We got the chicken, and the liquor (because you know we didn't stop at the gas station for gas), and proceeded to the house. My two potnuhs that have been my potnuh since literally forever, both still living in the neighborhood we grew up in, which helped for a smoother transition. One has provided me with a place to stay, while my other potnuh, who's just as close, stays right around the corner, and two blocks down. These two were with me at the party in 1993 when the fight broke out, shots erupted, with me hiding from the gunfire, and in line later to be questioned by detectives. They testified on my behalf at trial. They have always been there when I really need them. No lie! Both are loving fathers. Both are true friends. Both are my brothers and have suffered along with me through this every step of the way. Without their love, true friendship, and brotherhood, I would not have been able to survive a quarter of the weight and ordeal which eventually afforded me this opportunity...

So, all three carloads mobbed up at the place where I stay, because one of the restrictions I received at the EMP office was an 8 pm curfew. The judge ordered that I not work, nor enroll in any kind of education. I was ordered to pay \$10 to submit weekly urine for drug testing. Don't forget to include the \$2,350 I owed in bond payments at \$440 per month, not including interest. From day 1, I was in the red all the way around the board: financially, technologically, socially, and lacking knowledge of how society functions in parts and as a whole now.

At 37 years of age, I had never lived a life as an adult outside of being a prisoner! 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37 were all years I developed under very detrimental circumstances. In prison, I believed if I worked my plan I could acquire \$20,000 from family, friends, and the community to start out. I drafted a four-part/two-yr. transition plan that outlined the income I'd be able to earn cutting hair and working at least an \$11 hour/40 hours a week job. I would be able to afford transportation, rent, utilities, groceries, clothing, furniture, and whatever I could save. Gaining more stability/self-sufficiency 6 months at a time. And by the two-year mark of being free, I would be ready for a small business loan to start my own barbershop. However, my bond restrictions left that plan null and void. I was made to notify my monitoring office every time I needed to leave the house. I was only allowed to visit my mom in Slidell, attend church, court-dates, and meetings with the attorneys. I was not allowed to attend any social gatherings whatsoever: All-Star game, Congo Square Festival, IPNO Gala, Mardi Gras Ball...none of that!

Day 2, my attorneys had press interviews set up for me, with WWL ("After 20 years, wrongfully convicted man sees freedom"), NOLA.com ("Man convicted of 1993 Sweet 16 birthday shooting granted new trial; DA vows to appeal"), *The New Orleans Advocate* ("Taste of freedom after 20 years"), *The Advocate* ("New Orleans prisoner granted new trial in 1993 murder"), and *The Times-Picayune* ("After 20 years, a taste of life beyond jail") all at once. But before giving the interviews, in the conference room of our attorney's office, I had Parkway Po-boys for lunch with all the staff from my attorney's office, and three of my exonerated brothers of years passed.

While doing the interview, I couldn't help but to think of how much people need to know that there's a plantation going on in prison, and a prison going on inside the minds of our society. I thought about how much I needed to catch up with my life, catch up with my family, my mom, my son, my sister, nephews, nieces, cousins, aunts, uncles, and my friends. I thought about what I could say about bridging the gap. The gap between the actions that reach back for other wrongfully convicted persons (and those convicted and released ready to move on), and the bridges that reach toward these children who have seen some awful shit, had absolutely no childhood, and are struggling through far more physiological abuse than the average adult mind can tolerate.

Day 3, I went to visit McMain Senior High, and McDonogh 35 Senior High's, SAC AP English classes. The same classes that wrote to me in Angola, attended my very first day back in court November 2011, and wrote letters to the judge. Nonetheless, of course, those were not the same students. Those students, whom I would correspond with, when I was imprisoned, were now in college. Two of which, are like my very own children, who went on to Bard College in Upstate New York. I'm still in contact with them both. I have attended the current SAC classes with the both of them when they visit home. Being able to attend the SAC classes in person was so powerful, healing, encouraging, and uplifting. That very day turned into many and so much more.

Evening of day 3, I was able to visit my mom. I was accompanied by my sister. Oh how joyous that moment in time was for us! I'm looking at the photo on the phone now, as it captured my sister and me sitting on opposite sides, planting a kiss on each of my mother's cheeks. Automatic smile, right? Although that night I was "allowed" to stay some time after the 8pm curfew, I still had to prepare my mind to convince my heart to leave my Mom in that moment. In the end my sister and I rolled back to "my house" with smiles and more to celebrate.

Many people came to the house to celebrate. People I hadn't seen in ages. Some of whom I could never forget. Some of whom I vaguely remembered. Some of whom I couldn't quite recollect. A few of whom I had just met. In the next 4 or 5 days, more loved ones came by from out-of-state. I literally didn't sleep a wink for 4 days straight! We had a celebration on consecutive nights for a few days. It was such a thrill! I'm still going through moments thinking, I'm only dreaming. That deep appreciation for life, with amazing human beings, will just be with me forever. Nevertheless, I still was not "free"...

During a month's time, I hit the road with the former IPNO investigator. During his time with IPNO two witnesses who signed sworn affidavits felt comfortable admitting to him the absolute truth about their coerced testimonies at my trial, after many attempts by other IPNO staff members. During the course of his assignment on my case, from 2010 until now, he had grown to be like the lil brother I never had, and I the big brother he never had. For those who perceive the older generation to be the ones with the ability to share and pass on knowledge to the next generation, then one might agree that I may be viewed as the younger brother and he the older in aspects of our exchange of knowledge. But, by any measure, brothers indeed! He is a great father with a super spirit. In his new position as Case Manager for the Odyssey House's Re-Entry for the Ex-Offender (RExO) Program, located on Canal St., I signed up and he was now responsible for assisting in my re-entry process. This seemingly coincidental circumstance was right on time!

In the next couple weeks, I completed the Odyssey House Louisiana, Job Readiness & Sustainability Training. I learned how to surf the internet, email, apply for FAFSA, WIA grants, Job One/LA Works, DCFS/SNAP benefits. I learned how to do my resume, cover letter, and job applications, although all my applications ended up repeatedly rejected for no given reason. Through the RExO Program, I was able to go to the Odyssey House Clinic on N.Tonti St. I received a clean bill of health, including negative STD/HIV results. I also started my deep gum cleaning at Daughters of Charity Dental Clinic. I received the Medicaid card I applied for and attended therapy sessions with a LCSW, through EXCELth. I also went to open a Chase checking and a savings account. The accounts were needed because there were two sites set up allowing folks to donate money and order personal items for me including clothes, books, or anything from amazon.com. The sites were GiveForward (\$4,425 and 37 gifts) set up by IPNO, and YouCaring (\$2,154) set up by a close member of my support outside of IPNO. All of this money went to bills I had already accrued. Like the \$2,350 I owed for the remainder of the bond, the \$70 and accruing debt I owed for drug testing. Over \$1500 of that money also went towards rent and utilities; almost \$400 to obtain my driver's license and the rest toward various living expenses. For weeks, I received gifts from generous, compassionate, affiliates of IPNO, and of my own, all over the country. It actually felt like Christmas in February with all the UPS/FEDEX packages that were arriving in bunches a day...

Next I was introduced by the lil brother I never had to a man that's very much legendary in the struggle for "community freedom," in my personal opinion. At the RAE building on Saint Bernard Street, I finally shook the hand of Mr. John Thompson who spent 18 years behind bars in Angola for a crime he did not commit—14 of which were spent on death row after coming within weeks of execution before evidence was discovered by attorneys from Philadelphia, evidence that the D.A.'s Office hid blood test results and other evidence that proved Mr. Thompson's innocence. That moment for me was one of such great admiration, as JT, which he preferred me to call him, welcomed me without knowing as much about me as I knew about him. John Thompson is the founder and Executive Director of the non-profit Resurrection After Exoneration (RAE) Foundation. Since its opening in 2008, RAE has provided living quarters for over 60 exonerated and formally incarcerated men, connecting them, to support systems, equipping them with solutions as they transition amongst a myriad of biases and fast paced challenges as a formerly incarcerated person. The issues RAE tries to address and fulfill have scarce political resources in a state that has the highest incarceration rates in the world, in a country that has more men of African descent under United States' custody than enslaved here in 1850.

I learned of JT through a remarkable individual who was the first black staff member in IPNO's office, an investigator assigned to my case from 2006 to 2008. During her visits to Angola, I learned about RAE. She kept me updated on developments because it was of interest to us both, and the day would come when I could see it all for myself. I was in awe of JT's many triumphs, even after a divided Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) tossed out and reversed a jury verdict awarding JT \$14 million from District Attorney, Harry Connick, a verdict which held the Orleans Parish District Attorney's Office accountable for the crimes committed

by their office against Mr. Thompson. Despite his setback in redemption, JT still continues to help and offered me whatever he could to assist my reentry plight. However, I was fortunate enough to not need the resources other than utilizing the space for business and education. My involvement with SAC, and recommendations from mutual connections prompted JT to consider me for his very first Executive Program Director once I was exonerated, as he sets to expand RAE, and pursue prosecutorial accountability here in Lucy Anna's slaveholder mind-state.

I'm telling you my initial days, entire first week, if not weeks, is all just one recurring excitement. That's if the same excitement is not still recurring to this very day. Although now, I think that excitement is suffering from a big bite of home incarceration....

Per the Court Record:

03/24/2014

GEORGEM

>THE DEFENDANT, JEROME MORGAN APPEARED FOR RULING WITH COUNSEL, KRISTIN WENSTROM THE COURT DENIED IN PART THE DEFENSE MOTION TO MODIFY THE CONDITIONS OF BAIL. THE COURT GRANTED IN PART THE DEFENSE MOTION. THE COURT WILL VACATE THE CONDITION THAT THE DEFENDANT MUST DRUG TEST ONCE A WEEK. THE DEFENDANT WILL NOW DRUG TEST ONCE A MONTH. ALL OTHER CONDITIONS ARE TO REMAIN AS PREVIOUSLY IMPOSED. THE COURT NOTED THE OBJECTION BY THE STATE.
>CASE CLOSED, THIS DEFENDANT.

In the end the student assistance applications and job opportunities were abandoned, which has resorted to not earning a living or furthering my education.

Fast forward to Friday, September 19, 2014, I received a text at 4:38 PM, from my monitoring officer, stating that as of Sept. 21st she would no longer be my monitoring officer. Although I congratulated her on a promotion, I hated to lose her as my monitoring officer because she and I had developed such a healthy, understanding, and respectful rapport. The transition from one deputy to another was going smoothly, until the new monitoring officer texted me, "Go inside," at 11:49 AM, Tuesday, October 14th. I immediately called him to find out why. He said that there was no indication in my folder that the judge ordered me a curfew. Therefore, I would need to abide by the strict rules of 24/7 home incarceration until the judge's stipulations were clarified. Quite naturally, this made me livid because how would I cut hair independently, take care of my daily necessities, and visit SAC classes if I'm not allowed outta the house? However, I did manage to keep my composure and complied with the deputy's instruction. There was actually no record of my release, or the judge's stipulations, so we would have to request a transcribed copy of the judge's order from the judge's clerk. This request could take weeks, so I drove to the EMP office to notify the deputy. At the end of the day, the supervisor would agree to monitor my ankle bracelet until the transcribed copy of the judge's stipulations was furnished to my attorney...

On a Tuesday evening, Nov. 4th, I received a text from my attorney, "I've got the transcript of the ruling at the bond hearing...It says home incarceration subject to a curfew of your activities...It doesn't say 24/7, but it doesn't specify an exact curfew either." The next day, I swung by the IPNO office to retrieve this transcript to bring to the EMP supervisor. I really believed that the transcript fully clarified that the judge intended for the

EMP office to use its discretion concerning my restrictions. “As to Jerome Morgan... Special conditions will require home incarceration. You will be subject to a curfew of your activities, as well as all the appropriate restrictions as determined by the electronic monitoring authorities.” I was really excited as I drove to show this to the monitoring office. However, to my surprise, the EMP supervisor felt the need to contact the judge directly to confirm the legitimacy of this document. The Monitor would notify me when he spoke to the judge.

The evening of the very next day, I received a text message from the EMP supervisor, notifying me that I should return home, and to report to court with my attorney at 9AM the following morning. The next day once there was a break in the court docket, the judge side-barred with my attorney. Judging by the facial expressions and body language from both my attorney and the judge, I could tell that things were not looking good. As relayed to me by my attorney, now the stipulations from the judge were to have my attorney file a written request whenever I need to leave the house.

Since then, I’ve only been allowed to leave the house for dental appointments and therapist appointments. The judge approved a 9PM curfew from 12-21-2014 – 12-26-2014, and from noon–6 pm to visit my mom on January 17, 2015. On the other hand, he denied the requests to spend Thanksgiving in Houston with family and to attend the American Education Research Association’s workshop December 2014 (all-expense paid). The workshop was in Chicago to highlight how the students in Louisiana got involved and made a positive impact on the results of my case and the dynamics of that reciprocation. Shouldn’t I be content with not being in OPP or Angola any longer? I’ve been patient for all this time. What’s a few more months? Would any human-being be satisfied with the situation up to this point if it were them, or someone they know?

As of this writing, it’s been a little over a year since I’ve been on 24/7 home incarceration. All the financial help people had contributed to my plans to save, invest, and afford immediate necessities to be self-sufficiently stable, is all gone. All the employment and educational opportunities are on standby, if they aren’t missed opportunities by now. All holidays, and birthdays, have passed with me having the same frustrating excuse as to why I’m not able to give any of my loved-ones a token of my loving presence.

However, I was able to meet my son, Justin, in person, April 16, 2014, for the very first time since being released, and only the second time ever! Inasmuch, that’s something I must express separately from any other writing because of all there is to share. Some good, some bad... just like my days since being released. In the mean time I look forward to being like a guy I know that was released, only days after I was, after doing over 20 years. He is employed, has his own place to stay, purchased a brand new SUV, and he’s engaged to be married soon. Sounds like an extremely determined guy who is putting his freedoms to good use. He asked me, “When them people gonna let you off that ankle bracelet?” I replied “There’s no time limitation for that decision to be made, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the district judge’s ruling to overturn the conviction on May 23, 2014. Now the case has been pending in the LA Supreme Court since June 2014. Once their decision is finally rendered, then we’ll see if the DA’s Office will waste tax-payers money pursuing me for a 16 year old student’s loss of life, and continue destroying mine for no just reason.”

Now, I have been on electronic monitoring 408 days and counting, with 135 days of 24/7 home incarceration. I have traveled from Angola to OPP to attend two rounds of post- conviction court hearings, been to court ten times, in a span of 823 days between November 2011 and February 2014. However, for my wrongful conviction in 1994 I appeared in court a total of seven times, 131 days from the time I was arrested until I was given a mandatory life sentence. I guess it’s fair to say that it is far easier to lose your freedom than it is to regain your freedom.

As those words exited my mouth to explain and relive the situation, my soul says, “any day now...”

HOW COME IT'S SO BROKEN?

BY JARVIS DEBERRY

In 2006 I asked two judges at Orleans Parish Criminal District Court how come the criminal justice system seemed so broken, how come the number of arrests, even the number of prosecutions, were so much higher than the number of convictions. I'm somewhat embarrassed now that I framed my question the way I did. I was in Louisiana, a state that imprisons the world's highest percentage of its residents, and there I was asking why even more people weren't being sent away.

In my defense, though, my question was inspired by the unsafe streets in New Orleans. Louisiana was imprisoning the most people, but it didn't seem to be imprisoning the right people.

I was asking the judges about the brokenness of the system because statistics I'd seen said that a murder in New Orleans had a 13 percent chance of leading to a conviction. There was a greater chance that a suspected murderer in New Orleans would be killed on the street than convicted in a courtroom.

That's what I was trying to get at. Why was it so hard to convict violent criminals?

There seemed to be a lot of speculation that New Orleans jurors were just soft, that they lacked the maturity and the civic responsibility to send the guilty to their just punishment. It's impossible to ignore the racial implications of such arguments. New Orleans has long been a majority black city, so a complaint that juries aren't sufficiently fed up with crime is a thinly veiled way of saying that black people aren't doing their job to help bring crime under control.

Was there any truth at all to the criticism of those jurors?

The judges' answers startled me. One said, without hesitation, that fully half of the people arrested by the New Orleans police shouldn't have been and that the disparity between bookings and convictions could mostly be blamed on the high number of bogus arrests.

It was this judge's belief that jurors in New Orleans were fed up with crime, that they were eager for court cases that would allow them to express that frustration by rendering a guilty verdict, but that once they got in court they were too often confronted with dishonest police officers and other problematic evidence. That left them no choice, he said, but to vote against the state.

I don't remember the second judge being as explicit about police officers lying—he was more troubled by systematic incompetence, including poor evidence collection. This judge couldn't remember ever having a case where New Orleans police at the scene of a crime had dusted for fingerprints and brought that evidence to trial. Then the judge reconsidered. There'd been one case.

This second judge did tell me that if I wanted to understand why so many criminal cases in Orleans Parish fell apart, I should just make a random visit to his courtroom. I needn't announce when I was coming, he said. Any day he was holding motion hearings—deciding for example, the admissibility of the state's evidence—would suffice. Motion hearing days were better than trial days, this judge said, because I would be able to watch one case after another after another. He was confident I would see at least one case that would make me question the state's case.

I didn't have to wait long. The first case I heard when I arrived in his court made me wonder how the New Orleans police think they can get away with such blatant lying.

A black man had been arrested and charged as a felon in possession of a gun, a crime that requires a sentence of 10-20 years. According to the police officer who made the arrest and who took the stand, the defendant ran a stop sign and almost crashed into her and her partner in their cruiser. She slammed hard on the brakes just to avoid a collision, she testified. Then, she said, she pulled the car over, searched it and found a gun hidden beneath the passenger's seat. The passenger seat was occupied, but the driver was charged with illegal possession of the weapon because he was in the car with it.

Then that officer's partner took the stand. The defense attorney asked if he had observed the traffic violation that led the stop: the defendant running the stop sign.

"No, sir."

He said his partner told him the defendant had run the stop sign.

Defense attorney: "Anything obstructing your view?"

Police officer: "No, sir."

Defense attorney: "Did you all make a sudden stop?"

Police officer: "Not that I recall."

That partner never said explicitly that his partner was lying about the reason they stopped the car, but he was unmistakably tipping the court off to her lies.

So why did the car get pulled over?

According to the defendant's cousin, who had been riding in the back seat, they drove past a truck owned by an AC repair company he knew well. He testified that he turned around in his seat and he pointed backward. He said, "Hey, y'all, that's the company I was telling y'all I used to work for." As he was pointing, he said, he noticed the police car behind them.

They got pulled over because a backseat passenger pointed at the police. That's not a decision the police officer could defend in court. Hence the story that her partner refused to confirm: that the defendant ran a stop sign and almost caused a traffic accident.

I wasn't able stay to see how the judge ruled on the claim that the state's evidence was obtained during a bad stop. But he had predicted that I would see the flimsiness of the cases brought to his court, and I did, on the first case he called.

A 2011 report about the New Orleans Police Department prepared by the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice said:

We find reasonable cause to believe that NOPD officers engage in a pattern of stops, searches, and arrests that violate the Fourth Amendment. Detentions without reasonable suspicion are routine, and lead to unwarranted searches and arrests without probable cause. Our review of 145 randomly-sampled arrest and investigative reports confirmed a pattern of unlawful conduct.

Of the arrests that NOPD initiated, we found that a significant portion reflected on their face apparent constitutional violations, in that officers failed to articulate sufficient facts to justify stops, searches, and arrests.

That's just one of the report's many criticisms of the Police Department. There are also allegations of racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-immigrant bias. If it's oppressive and unconstitutional, there's a very good chance that the New Orleans Police Department is doing it.

I was discussing that report with an attorney who works with appellate cases in Louisiana. If the police are that bad, the attorney said, how come we don't see Louisiana's higher courts routinely overturning convictions and finding for the defendants? Those defendants, that attorney said, are often making the same allegations of unfairness and unconstitutional policing that the Department of Justice report makes. And yet the lower courts generally permit the evidence, and the higher courts validate that choice.

You'll notice that that attorney's question is essentially the opposite of the one I had asked five years earlier. I counted it a problem that more people weren't going to prison. My attorney friend counted it a problem that more people weren't being released from prison on appeal despite the finding from the Department of Justice that New Orleans police were poorly acquainted with the Constitution.

We have been conditioned to accept the findings of the criminal justice system, even though we know that the criminal justice—especially Louisiana's—is deeply, deeply flawed.

In March 2014, John Thompson, the founder and director of Resurrection After Exoneration, an advocacy group for former prisoners, was trying to convince Glenn Ford to sit with me for an interview. Ford, like Thompson, had been on Louisiana's Death Row before being set free. Thompson won a big judgment against the Orleans Parish district attorney's office for its deliberate and calculated decision to railroad him onto death row. But Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas—ignoring copious amounts of evidence that said otherwise—wrote a majority opinion saying Thompson had not proved that the district attorney's office had exhibited a pattern of such atrocious conduct.

In a dissenting opinion, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote, "What happened here, the Court's opinion obscures, was no momentary oversight, no single incident of a lone officer's misconduct. Instead, the evidence demonstrated that misperception and disregard of (exculpatory evidence) disclosure requirements were pervasive in Orleans Parish. That evidence, I would hold, established persistent, deliberately indifferent conduct for which the District Attorney's Office bears responsibility."

She was right. There had been many instances of prosecutors in then District Attorney Harry Connick's office refusing to turn over evidence helpful to the defense. And, as if to prove Ginsburg's point, eight months after Justice Thomas's argument in the Thompson case, the U.S. Supreme Court heard another case out of Connick's office involving a death row inmate and prosecutorial misconduct.

Thomas still voted to deny that inmate, Juan Smith, relief, but, this time, he was the only one. The eight other justices—yes, even Antonin Scalia—ruled in Smith's favor.

When Thompson was standing inside his group's office on St. Bernard Avenue trying to persuade the newly released Ford to talk to me about his experiences, he explained to Ford that I had interviewed "just about all of us."

A state that has sizable a population of former death row inmates who were able to show that they were convicted and sentenced to death because of misbehaving prosecutors shouldn't expect its residents to trust its criminal justice system. And, yet, by default, most of us accept and trust the findings of our system.

After the 1978 conviction and death sentence of Walter McCleskey, a black Georgia man who killed a white police officer, the condemned man's attorneys presented evidence to the U.S. Supreme Court that the death penalty is racist in its application. Known as the Baldus Study, after its lead researcher David C. Baldus, the study examined more than 2,000 1970s murder cases in Georgia and concluded that defendants charged with killing white people were 4.3 times more likely to be sentenced to death than defendants who killed black people.

That study found that prosecutors sought a death sentence in 70 percent of cases involving a black defendant and a white victim, but that when both the accused and victim were white, a death sentence was sought only 32 percent of the time. And for black defendants accused of killing black people, Georgia's prosecutors in the 70s sought the death penalty in 15 percent of cases.

Justice Lewis Powell, writing for the 5-4 majority, didn't reject the Baldus Study or its findings. He accepted it as truth, and followed it with a "but."

"Even Professor Baldus does not contend that his statistics prove that race enters into any capital sentencing decisions, or that race was a factor in McCleskey's particular case," Powell wrote. "Statistics, at most, may show only a likelihood that a particular factor entered into some decisions ... McCleskey asks us to accept the likelihood allegedly shown by the Baldus study as the constitutional measure of an unacceptable risk of racial prejudice influencing capital sentencing decisions. This we decline to do."

Despite the great likelihood that McCleskey wouldn't have been on death row if he'd killed a black man, the Supreme Court decided that he hadn't proved that his particular case was negatively influenced by racial considerations.

Just because something happens a lot of the time—even most of the time—the majority opinion said, it doesn't mean that it's happening at any one particular time.

I've been critical of Powell's ruling on that matter. (I'm not alone in that regard. Years after his retirement he revealed in an interview that that's the one case he'd like to do over.) But I make similar arguments in my mind. Just because the Louisiana criminal justice system has been shown to be messed up, that doesn't mean that a particular prisoner is innocent, does it?

How can I know? With a limited amount of time and resources and no legal training, how could I know if a particular inmate is innocent or not?

This is not an abstract or a hypothetical concern.

It's rare that a week goes by when a letter doesn't arrive at my desk from a Louisiana inmate declaring his innocence. I'm certain that so many inmates write to me because they see me writing about injustice in the system. Many have said as much.

But it's easier to say the system is bad than it is to say that a particular prisoner who writes me from prison is innocent. Given what I know, given what I've reported and written, why's it so hard for me to believe individual stories of alleged injustice? Maybe I'm afraid of growing to believe in an inmate's innocence only to be later mocked for being naïve. Maybe it's just easier to not think about all the evidence of corruption in the justice system and to close my eyes and hope that justice can emerge even from such a system as this. I went to those judges in 2006 because I wanted the violent criminals to be punished, but is that desire leaving me blind to injustice?

I don't believe myself to be alone in these mental negotiations. However much we know, I figure that we all know something that should cause us to doubt the integrity of Louisiana's criminal justice system. Still, we either implicitly or explicitly trust the arrests, the prosecutions, the convictions and the sentences from a system we know is corrupt and untrustworthy and racist.

And so it continues. I keep saying the system is bad and presenting evidence of that. And the letters from prison keep piling up on my desk ignored.

RULES AND CONSEQUENCES

BY DAVE CASH

It's early November. We're most of the way through the toughest, longest slog of the academic school year. Teachers, who haven't had a day off in ten weeks, are tired. Students, many of whom are still adjusting to a new school after theirs were closed last year, are tired too. In my fourth period, Davane and Shandrel, two fast friends, bring a wry joy with them to class every day. They are normal teenagers. They love to socialize, laugh, push people's buttons, express their individuality, and explore the limits of their own freedom. Sometimes this exploration is at odds with the cooperation required to have a class discussion or listen to students share their writing with their peers. When I told Davane she could no longer sit next to Shandrel, she stood up tall, looked me right in the eye and said, "You can't tell me what to do. I do what I want." I remember what it's like to feel the way she feels. Though her words threw me for a loop as a teacher, as a fellow human and former teenager, I admire her honesty and respect her courage to stand up to me.

Candace is one of my hardest working students. She's serious about school, independent, and responsible. She expresses regularly how much she appreciates all the new ideas she's learning this year. In her class, we've been having students run class from time to time. Yesterday, I asked her if she wanted to run class. She smiled brightly and said she did. She had run class once before and it went very well. She has the respect of her peers and she holds them to high expectations both academically and socially. But yesterday was different. I was taking roll and noticed the class wasn't getting started on their work and that Candace was staring at her phone. I said, "Candace, are you going to get class started?" She looked up from her phone and said, "I say we don't do anything in class today." I said, "Sorry, that's not an option," and she quickly replied, "Well, then I don't want to run class." My initial reaction was one of surprise. I expected more from Candace. On the other hand, she too is a normal teenager. She wants to find out how free she really is in this system of education and in this society. I, too, wonder how free I am.

As a child, I was taught that rules were important. I was taught that rules kept us safe, that they kept things running efficiently and effectively. Nothing in my experience as a little white boy from the suburbs contradicted those teachings. So I internalized those ideas about rules as truth. I believed that if there was a rule against some type of behavior, then that type of behavior was wrong. I believed that if someone broke a rule, then that person was wrong. Further, I agreed that the consequences for breaking rules, like the rules themselves, were fair and that, generally speaking, people who broke rules got what they deserved. To my naïve, young mind, a person's ability to enjoy a life without punishment or deprivation of freedom was essentially dependent on that individual's personal choices. As far as I could tell, everyone had the same opportunity to do the right thing and thus enjoy freedom from punishment.

Although I no longer see the world through such blind eyes, the image of rules and consequences as virtuous and fair has never fully faded from my retinas. Yes, I broke a lot of rules as a rebellious teenager and young adult, but never in a way that seriously threatened my status. I cut my hair into a Mohawk when I was in high school and dyed my hair pink in college. I was mostly curious to see how my family and friends would see me if I didn't conform to their expectations. I have always sought ways to express my individuality, but rarely, if ever, in ways that put me in any danger. Deep down, I think I still find rules comforting. My profession for sixteen years was working with and programming computers. That work is all about learning rules and then learning how to exploit them. My childhood affinity for rules made me an excellent programmer. I learned to deftly bend machines to my will or to the will of those who paid me.

But while rules helped me feel safe, trying to help people is what has made my life meaningful. I didn't feel like I was doing much good working alone in front of my computer all day. If I was making a positive impact on

folks' lives—and I doubt I was—I couldn't see it. After Hurricane Katrina swept through New Orleans, the place I'd grown to love most in the world, I felt even more acutely that I wanted to do something more meaningful, something that would help my city heal. So, I became a teacher. It was scary to learn something new, but a lot of the language used by my education instructors sounded familiar enough. "Every teacher should have a clear set of rules and consequences in their classroom." "Teachers need to maintain control of their classrooms at all times." "Students may not show it, but deep down, they all crave structure and order." In the abstract, it seemed pretty doable. After all, rules and consequences made me feel safe. Why wouldn't they make my students feel the same way?

I soon learned that lots of people really don't feel the same way about rules and consequences as I learned to feel when I was young. And, as I've discovered, their resentments are often very well justified.

Today, I live in a predominantly black neighborhood of a predominantly black city and I teach in a predominantly—and historically—black school. I belong to a predominantly black labor union. The culture of New Orleans is rooted in blackness. I've done a lot of work in recent years to understand what my whiteness means in this context. Peers, elders, and students have helped me learn what it means to be both white and black in America today. As a result, I am acutely aware of the delicate danger of giving a white teacher authority over black students. My affinity for rules and consequences weaponizes me in this context. If I'm not careful, I have the power to do some real, lasting damage.

I know that black students are suspended at more than three times the rate white students are suspended. I also know that some pretty dire outcomes are highly correlated to school suspension: repeating a grade, delaying graduation, dropping out, and ending up behind bars. None of these are outcomes I want for my students. Sadly, the school-to-prison pipeline is all too real. So I am extremely cautious about using the power I have to punish my students for the freedom they exhibit, disruptive though it may be, in our classroom. This means that when Jovan, Jamal, and Keno are talking to each other when their classmates are trying to have a discussion about the reading, I ask them to please be quiet and listen to their classmates, but I don't do anything more when they keep talking again after a quick apology and a brief pause. I attribute their talkativeness to their age, the fact that they attend a school that gives them precious little time to socialize, and the reality that it's probably much safer for three young, black men to chat in a classroom than it might be for them to congregate on a corner in an over-policed neighborhood.

I also know that some students don't cooperate with me because I'm white, and I understand that. As a student and teacher of African-American Studies, I know too well the many reasons white people—especially those in positions of some authority—deserve to be disregarded or untrusted by people of color. One day, after an alumnus of our school, Ronald Magee, had spoken to our class, I asked Wendell why he was having side conversations in class when he had had given Mr. Magee his full attention the day before. Wendell replied without hesitation, "Because he's black."

So what is my place as a white man in a black school? Do I do more harm in this context than good, or can I be the change I wish to see in the world? The Georgia-born historian Ulrich B. Phillips analyzed the system of slavery through his Progressive-era lens and came up with a very disturbing analogy. I think a lot about what he wrote, way back in 1918:

Every plantation of the standard Southern type was, in fact, a school, constantly training and controlling pupils who were in a backward state of civilization. . . . New industrial methods of a simple sort they might learn from precepts and occasional demonstrations; the habits and standards of civilized life they could only acquire in the main through examples reinforced with discipline. These the plantation régime supplied. Each white family served very much the function of a modern social settlement, setting patterns of orderly, well-bred conduct which the negroes were encouraged to emulate; and the

planters furthermore were vested with a coercive power, salutary in the premises, of which settlement workers are deprived. The very aristocratic nature of the system permitted a vigor of discipline which democracy cannot possess. On the whole the plantations were the best schools yet invented for the mass training of that sort of inert and backward people which the bulk of the American negroes represented. (Phillips, 1918)

Nearly a century after this analogy was described—and centuries after its actual practice—our system of schooling black children in this country is largely still bound by the ideology of paternalistic white supremacy. I want to believe that my passion for justice and the hard work I’ve done—to see my own biases, privileges, inhumanity, and power for what they are—positions me to do good in a fundamentally flawed system. But I continue to wonder if I can ever truly escape the troubling realities of my identity—and all the baggage it brings.

In my fourth period, Azreil loves participating in our class discussions. She does her reading every day before class and always has something thoughtful to say. However, too often, other students have side-conversations that made it hard to hear what she (and other participants in the discussion) were saying. She has, on several occasions, asked me to “be a dictator” in my approach to disruptions that derail our discussions. I’m not interested in playing that part at all. On the other hand, a day rarely passes without at least one student entering class and asking me if we can have a “free day” or watch a movie. These requests make me cringe every time. Obviously, I’m uncomfortable leading a classroom that is either not free or completely free. I don’t want to oppress my students; I want them to have the freedom to express themselves. I also want to help them listen and interact with each other more effectively. My dream for our classroom is that it becomes a place where decorum, not control, is what guides the actions of students, teachers, and guests. I don’t expect us all to be perfect communicators every time; learning to act collectively in an individualistic culture can be challenging for anyone of any age. I want our classroom to be a place where we can make mistakes and where we can learn from them. In my experience, putting students out or suspending them rarely helps them learn better classroom decorum. But allowing students who refuse to acknowledge the social impact of their personal choices to continue to limit that community’s potential feels unfair and disrespectful. Still, what becomes of the so-called bad apples when they are culled from the bunch? They don’t deserve to be delivered to a greater likelihood of poverty, incarceration, and violence.

I still believe in rules. I still believe we get more out of our time together as people when we follow rules. Or maybe just when we observe other people’s boundaries. I still believe in discipline, but I think self-discipline is the most effective kind. It must be taught, not enforced. Rigidly controlling student behavior in the way many New Orleans charter schools do—with zero tolerance, “no excuses” mantras, with duct-tape lanes in hallways, with level-zero classrooms, with “hips and lips,” with petty demerits and public humiliation—doesn’t teach anything but fear, compliance and obedience, skills that serve few but prisoners well. These methods also breed anger, resentment, and alienation that put young people at even greater risk of practicing the kind of behavior that attracts police attention in the first place.

When Davane defied my authority that day in November, I didn’t escalate the situation with a confrontation. She sat where she wanted to sit and after class I talked to an Assistant Principal about the situation and asked her to talk with Davane. I chose this Assistant Principal because he honored my desire not to suspend students. He knew I always preferred to teach them rather than cast them aside. But Davane resented the fact that I asked the Assistant Principal and continued to behave as she pleased in my class. I know less learning occurred than could have because of both of our actions. On the other hand, I know that resistance is in the DNA of New Orleanians, especially black New Orleanians, who have time and again squared off against injustices. Students need to be able to develop and practice this legacy of resistance, because many struggles still lie ahead.

As hard as it may be, I have to remind myself constantly that as a public school teacher, I'm only one piece of a larger system. Often the system isn't designed to create the most conducive learning environment. Large class sizes—especially at the end of the day—are hard to manage. Students with wide ranges of readiness are indiscriminately scheduled together. Many students walk into school each day carrying worries, crises—and sometimes trauma—yet are expected to behave the same as everyone else. Many rules at school exist to mitigate these aspects of the system. There are limits to what I can do in class, especially when it involves heated conflicts between students. Often these conflicts require removing students from class. If I knew that our school would work with those students, using restorative practices to teach them how to better handle conflicts in the future, I would be quicker to move them out when the friction gets too hot. But today I let these conflicts last too long, hoping they will fizzle out so we can get back to learning. I want to trust the system outside our classroom door, but right now, I don't.

As a child, I was taught all the rules to being a good Christian. And everyone made sure I also knew the consequences of breaking these rules: eternal damnation, separation from loved ones in the afterlife, and a shroud of shame to be worn as I moved through the world. Through my early childhood and adolescence, I thrived in this system, because it made me feel safe. But as I was becoming an adult, I started to lose faith in the whole system. The more I thought about it, the less it made sense. Why would a system supposedly based on the power of love concern itself so much with punishment and exclusion? So I walked away and never looked back. Today I find myself enmeshed in another system that projects a culture of nurture while practicing a culture of control. Maybe I'm a fool or maybe I'm arrogant, but this time, I don't want to walk away. I want to believe I can clog up the pipeline with my resistance instead of feeding it with young people's futures.

I know I can't do it myself. We need faculty, school staff, students, parents, and administrators to collaboratively envision a system that ensures all students have a high-quality learning environment without sacrificing anyone to a life of incarceration or exclusion. This means building strong organizations like teachers' unions, parent-teacher-student associations, student councils, etc.; working collectively starts with getting organized. Everyone deserves to know both what is expected of them and also that they are loved and needed. Everyone deserves to be seen as a person, not as merely a test-taker, and certainly not as an obstacle. I believe that, working together, we can design and build a system that feels safe and empowering, a system where we all see each other, all learn from each other, and all learn to grow from our conflicts instead of being destroyed by them.

CRUEL AND UNUSUAL

BY KRISTEN ROME

I became familiar with the Angola name long before I was conscious of the horror conjured up by it. My first recollections of Angola are observing my parents arrange and prepare for visits. Back then, legal visits were a lot less restrictive so my dad could bring my mom along with him for the day-long trips. He spent so much time at Angola that I think, at one point, he probably had more friends in prison than out. As I understood it, most visits were to see clients, but many were to share with his friend and brother, Donald. Though I don't know the details of their meeting, I do know that they were friends prior to Mr. Don receiving a sentence of 160 years in Angola for several counts of armed robbery, kidnapping and attempted murder. Mr. Don's only child, who was only a few months past her first birthday at the time of her father's arrest, is my parents' only goddaughter and through her, our connection to Mr. Don remained even after my dad shifted his legal practice and stopped making visits.

My first visit to Angola was during my first year of law school with the A.P. Tureaud Chapter of the Black Law Students Association at Loyola University New Orleans. I was part of a group of about one hundred law students, most of whom were not from New Orleans. We went there to tour the prison grounds. Aside from what I learned that day from our prison guard tour guide about day-to-day life at Angola, just seeing the grounds for myself was enough to sicken me. One way in and one way out; and once there, for literally as far as the eye can see, there is nothing but prison grounds—18,000 acres worth.

My first attorney visit came two years later when my dad and I travelled as law partners to visit Mr. Don and get updates about his impending parole hearing. We didn't represent him before the parole board, but we were there when his release was granted in October of 2012. Less than a year later, I made my third visit to Angola. This time, I travelled there with an investigator from Innocence Project New Orleans, Mosi Makori. Mosi had been investigating George Toca's case for a few years by then and he introduced the two of us that day. That visit initiated my involvement in juvenile justice.

George Toca was watching a film in his horticulture class on the December 2015 morning that he found out his case would be going before the United States Supreme Court. He told me that he'd spent the night before, and part of that morning, working out the details of how he would explain his decision to abandon his religious faith. Horticulture was a newer interest for George, one he decided to pick up in 2012 in preparation to, one day, reassembling his life. Recognizing landscaping as a stable source of income and financial independence, George was getting ready. But many years earlier he had earned a theology degree from the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary at Louisiana State Penitentiary—more commonly known as Angola Prison. Explaining his disillusionment with God would not be expected nor easy.

Gary Tyler called George out of class that December morning to tell him that his case would be reviewed in a conference before the Justices. When Gary was convicted and sentenced to life in prison way back in 1975, he was the youngest person on death row in America. Having your case discussed in a private conference among the Justices is a rare opportunity, and it is also the first step in having an application to the U.S. Supreme Court granted. A Supreme Court review is an indication of the Court's interest in an issue as relevant to the nation as a whole rather just to an individual plaintiff. In the case of George Toca, the issue up for review was whether a recent Supreme Court decision should be applied retroactively.

Gary Tyler, like George, was wrongfully convicted of murder while still a minor and had been fighting to have his conviction overturned for over three decades. Convicted by an all-white jury in 1975 of a 13 year-old white boy's killing, Gary Tyler's conviction has long been criticized as unjust, with numerous witnesses recanting their testimonies and strong suggestions of evidence tampering. Both Gary and George recognized that the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Miller v. Alabama* was likely to get them out of prison more quickly than their innocence. So, it was fitting that Gary Tyler was the one to tell George that the United States Supreme Court was reviewing *Toca v. Louisiana* and George's writ of certiorari to determine whether the Court's decision in *Miller* should be applied retroactively.

Miller v. Alabama, the third in a string of U.S. Supreme Court opinions that have completely changed the way the criminal system handles juvenile transgressors, was decided in the summer of 2012. In its opinion, the Court held that the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment forbids sentencing children—those under the age of 18 at the time of the offense—to mandatory life without parole sentences for homicide. More plainly, the decision made it a requirement that state courts hold sentencing hearings before sentencing an individual to die in prison, if that person was a child at the time of the murder for which she or he was

convicted. After a sentencing hearing, the judge has discretion to determine whether the individual should die in prison or be given a sentence that would allow an opportunity for parole. A retroactive application of the *Miller* decision allows for prisoners, whose convictions are final, to have their life without parole sentences reviewed by a judge through a sentencing hearing. Since the Court's ruling, a very small number of states have refused to apply the decision retroactively to older convictions. Louisiana, the incarceration capital of the world, is one such state.

Social and criminal justice advocates have made noteworthy progress in the last decade vis-à-vis children offenders, but America continues to trail other countries in acknowledging the interplay between immaturity, crime, punishment and rehabilitation. Only a decade ago, the United States stood alone as the only country in the world to still allow the execution of children offenders. It wasn't until March of 2005 in *Roper v. Simmons*, that the Supreme Court ruled that killing children as punishment for a crime was a cruel and unusual practice. Shareef Cousin, was one of the 11 children sentenced to execution in Louisiana before *Roper* banned such sentences. Cousin was only 17 years old in 1996 when he was condemned to die for murder. He was 20 years old when he was exonerated in 1999. Had defense attorneys not uncovered severe intentional government abuse and predatory prosecution in Cousin's case, it is likely that he would have been executed by the state of Louisiana before *Roper* would have saved his life.

The Court's reasoning in *Roper* was grounded in the principle that capital punishment is reserved for the worst offenders with extreme culpability. Cousin would argue that such might be true in theory, but rarely seen in practice. In an opinion piece published in September of 2014, Cousin wrote, "[t]he system does not identify and sentence 'the worst of the worst' to death—just the most powerless"—a classification that undoubtedly includes children. The Court went on to demonstrate that children cannot and should not be classified among the "worst" offenders because there are significant differences between children and adults that make children less culpable. In distinguishing the development of children from that of adults, *Roper* laid the groundwork for juvenile justice supporters to begin carving out a more contemporary approach to children trapped in the adult criminal system.

Another five years would pass before the Supreme Court would again consider sentencing practices, as they relate to the juvenile transgressor. This time, instead of only distinguishing children and adults based on behavioral practices, the Court acknowledged that punishment for a crime must be proportional to the crime itself. *Graham v. Florida* placed a categorical ban on life without parole sentences for children offenders convicted of any crime other than homicide. Acknowledging that a life without parole sentence is the "second most severe penalty permitted by law," the Court noted that a sentence to die in prison is extremely harsh for a juvenile offender because the juvenile will, on average, serve a greater percentage of her or his life in prison than an adult who has committed the same act. For this reason, the Court reserved sentences to die in prison for homicide convictions.

Like *Roper*, the *Graham* decision was a significant gain on behalf of children, but lagged behind the rest of the world's understanding of children offenders. At the time *Graham* was decided, the U.S. and Israel were the only countries to still impose life without parole sentences on children convicted of non-homicide offenses. Still, both decisions had meaningful and concrete impact on incarcerated children—*Roper* commuted the death sentences of seventy-two individuals to life without parole sentences, while *Graham* corrected the sentences of one hundred twenty-three prisoners. Such impact was a direct result of the *Roper* and *Graham* rulings being applied retroactively to convictions. Likewise, the full potential of *Miller* cannot be actualized without retroactivity.

Depending on whom you ask, the ruling in *Miller v. Alabama* marks either the beginning of a juvenile justice revolution in this country or the end of isolated changes to juvenile criminal policies. I subscribe to the former theory. I was 26 years old, and only nine months into my legal practice when I was introduced to the *Miller* decision by Shon Williams. Shon, who later became a client and my friend, was only 17 years old when he fatally shot another student during a gang fight at Francis T. Nichols High School in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. During the same visit where I met George, I was introduced to Troy Delone, another friend enslaved at Angola Prison. Troy in turn introduced me to Shon. At that time, Shon was confident that the *Miller* ruling would prevent him from dying in prison for a crime he committed over twenty years previously, and he was even hopeful that he would be home in time to celebrate his 37th birthday the following March. I was too. By the end of our visit that afternoon, Shon had retained my representation: payment was an order of French fries. In November of 2012, I filed a motion to correct Shon's illegal sentence in light of *Miller*. It was the first motion of its kind to be filed in Orleans Parish.

Shon's motion was granted by the district court and a resentencing hearing was set. As we prepared for Shon's hearing—gathering witnesses who could attest to Shon's immaturity and his familial surroundings at the time of the murder, his progress over the past twenty years, and the support he would receive upon his release from prison—Daryl Tate's case came up through the pipeline. In Tate's case, the district court denied his resentencing under *Miller* and his attorneys appealed to the Louisiana Supreme Court for review. This time, Louisiana's high court accepted the appeal to make a clear ruling on their interpretation of *Miller*. Shon's pending resentencing hearing was stayed (a legal term that essentially means a case is placed on hold) by the district court until the *Tate* case was ruled on.

On November 5, 2013, almost one year to the day after Shon's motion was filed, the Louisiana Supreme Court handed down their decision in *State v. Tate*. The Court reasoned that, because the *Miller* decision had not placed a categorical ban on life-without-parole sentences for juvenile offenders convicted of homicide and the sentence could still be imposed after a sentencing hearing, the *Miller* decision announced a procedural change and not a substantive one. Chief Justice Bernette J. Johnson, the first woman and first of African descent to hold the Chief Justice position, was the sole Justice to disagree with the majority. She opined that the *Miller* decision presented a substantive rule and that the US Supreme Court intended for *Miller* to apply retroactively for a number of reasons. One reason she noted, and probably the most obvious of them all, is that in *Jackson v. Hobbs*, the case consolidated with *Miller*, the US Supreme Court reversed the Arkansas Courts and ordered that Kuntrell Jackson be resentenced. Kuntrell Jackson's conviction had already been affirmed by Arkansas' high court at the time his case was consolidated with *Miller*. In effect, the Supreme Court applied its decision in *Miller* retroactively to Kuntrell Jackson's case. Chief Justice Johnson found that this action fully supported a retroactive application of *Miller*, writing that under *Teague*, "Once a new rule is applied to the defendant in the case announcing the rule, even handed justice requires that it be applied retroactively to all who are similarly situated."

The Louisiana Supreme Court's decision in *Tate* drastically altered the approach to *Miller* resentencing in Louisiana. What we once considered an obvious decision was now a fierce battle, and the next step was unclear. In the meantime, the Louisiana legislature proposed and passed new legislation that would affect juveniles convicted of homicide after 2012. Under the new law, judges have discretion to sentence juveniles convicted of murder to life without parole *or* life with a possibility of parole after serving 35 years. In the months following the *Tate* decision, it became apparent that the only way Louisiana's juvenile offenders convicted prior to *Miller* would benefit from its ruling would be for the US Supreme Court to take up the issue of retroactivity directly. And so, George Toca became the center of the cause.

At the time *Miller* was decided there were nearly twenty-five hundred so-called "juvenile lifers" nationwide, and over two hundred in Louisiana. For George Toca, *Miller* resentencing would likely be his only hope for

freedom since his post-conviction innocence claim was denied in 2010. But under Louisiana's interpretation of *Miller*, George had no right to a resentencing hearing. So, with that, the door was open for George's attorneys at Innocence Project of New Orleans (IPNO) to appeal his case to the United States Supreme Court.

George says he was doubtful about the prospect of his case actually being heard by the highest court in the country. According to him, his attorneys weren't necessarily convinced either. Still, they decided to move forward, and on September 29, 2014, a petition was filed on George's behalf with the United States Supreme Court. For those of us already over two years into the work, we saw George's case as an ideal set of facts to demonstrate the need to apply *Miller* retroactively. While the *Miller* ruling had nothing to do with the juvenile offender's innocence, there was no denying the value in placing the case of an innocent man before the U.S. Supreme Court. George's petition was granted the same day that Gary Tyler called him out of horticulture class, and it didn't take long for word to spread through Angola Prison. I asked George what it was like to have his case accepted by the U.S. Supreme Court and he compared it to being Lil Wayne—he had become a celebrity at Angola.

Juvenile justice advocates across the country—particularly in Louisiana—began closely watching George's case in anticipation. Jerome Morgan, a close friend of both Shon Williams and George Toca, also took a special interest in the case. It was George who took the first step in opening the way for Jerome's 2014 release from Angola. Jerome, who had been sentenced as a juvenile to die in prison, spent nearly 20 years in Angola for a murder that he did not commit before his conviction was overturned. It's my understanding that George referred Jerome to Innocence Project New Orleans. George was a client of Innocence Project New Jersey at the time, but had just met with IPNO the previous week as they were making plans to open the New Orleans office. Jerome also formed a close brotherhood with Shon Williams during his time at Angola prison. A testament to the parallels between poverty, education, socialization and incarceration, Shon and Jerome were both students at Francis T. Nichols High School in 1993, and were convicted of murders that happened one week apart—details that I've learned since Jerome's release. It wasn't until they were incarcerated that they became friends.

Had Jerome not received relief from the district court, he too would be counting on the *Miller* ruling to bring about his freedom. Instead, his relief came in the form of a new trial after witnesses revealed that, as teenagers, they were coerced into identifying Jerome as their friend's killer. Although free in the literal sense of the word, Jerome remains under 24-hour home detention while he awaits the Louisiana Supreme Court's affirmation of his conviction being vacated. Those witnesses have been charged with perjury by the state of Louisiana for recanting statements that they were forced to make as children. Like many others I've mentioned, I met Jerome during one of my visits to Angola. Since his release, we've developed a relationship like that of a big brother and little sister; working closely to end mass incarceration in Louisiana and across the nation. In fact, we, with the encouragement of Mosi Makori and in collaboration with Students at the Center, had begun organizing students to write letters to the U.S. Supreme Court in support of *Miller*'s retroactivity when we found out that IPNO would be withdrawing its petition to the Court on George's behalf. George had been offered a plea deal by the Orleans Parish District Attorney's Office that would allow his immediate release from prison.

On January 29, 2015, one day after we learned the news of the plea offer, George walked out of Angola prison—the largest maximum-security prison in America—after 30 years of wrongful incarceration. The overwhelming majority of Angola's inmates never walk out; instead, their remains are carried out in pine boxes. So, as friends, we proudly stood behind George's decision to enter the plea agreement. However, as champions for *Miller*'s retroactive application, we were troubled. I was angry. Not with George, but with IPNO. With less than two months until the U.S. Supreme Court would hear arguments to support retroactivity and likely provide relief to thousands incarcerated women and men, they'd given up. The decision to accept the

offer was not an easy one for George. He talked to me about how he considered his friends, including Shon Williams and Gary Tyler. More importantly, he said he considered the possibility of receiving a sentencing hearing under *Miller* and being resentenced to life without parole. With less than three days to work through his concerns, he decided the best move was to choose the alternative that would guarantee his release from prison. And none of us could blame him for that choice.

Under the plea agreement, George's murder conviction was vacated and he was forced to plead guilty to manslaughter for the murder of his best friend, Eric Baptiste. Additionally, George pleaded guilty to two counts of armed robbery and was sentenced to 40 years on each count, both to run concurrently with one another but consecutive to the 21 year manslaughter sentence. In total, George received a 61-year sentence. He was given credit for the 30 ½ years he had already served and allowed to leave prison the same day with "good time" calculations. Two weeks passed before George realized that he would be under parole supervision until 2045—the remaining 30 ½ years of his sentence. I'm not clear on whether that was a stipulation left out by the State when sorting the details of the plea or if it was just one that was not communicated to George by his attorneys. Either way, I think that brings into question whether his guilty plea was "knowingly, voluntarily and intelligently" entered as required by law.

Justice is a complex concept. For many, George's release from prison amounts to justice because he has regained his physical freedom. For others, like Shon and Jerome, George's release is anything but just. Freedom is less about altering the physical space that one occupies than it is about exterminating systems that control and oppress us. Under government supervision, George cannot move freely throughout the world without the state's permission. Further, with multiple felony convictions, he is unable to access most forms of employment, housing, voting rights and assistance. As such, a large portion of his support will come from the community—a community that, 30 years later, remains impoverished and underdeveloped. Most devastating is that because George chose not to take a chance on allowing the very system that placed him in prison to release him, he is ineligible to receive state compensation for over thirty years of wrongful incarceration. And while the direct impact of the plea offer is vast in George's life, it moves beyond him to affect the lives of thousands of women and men who have been enslaved in U.S. prisons since before they were even of age to vote, under sentences that have been deemed cruel and unusual.

STUDENT-CENTERED PEDAGOGY AND EDUCATION STANDARDS

BY JIM RANDELS

I was teaching at McDonogh 35 High School in New Orleans in the early 1990's when Jerome Morgan was a student there.

I still remember one of the most depressing days in my teaching career. It too was in the 1990's at McDonogh 35 and a handful of years since Jerome had been a student there. My depression, though, had nothing to do with Jerome.

Students were cheering and celebrating. Impromptu dance and beats circles were erupting in the hallways. Normally I love to see students smiling and excited at school and engaging in communal celebrations. But on this last hour or so of a school day, I wasn't feeling it.

Scores on the first year of the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) had just been released. As would soon enough happen across most of the U. S., individual scores would determine if students could graduate from high school based on this single test. All of our students had earned passing grades.

But our state had just paved the road to lower expectations and declining quality of education for McDonogh 35 students and their peers across the state. Hence my dismay.

The LEAP tests, and for many years their successors in End of Course tests, required no writing (and later no serious, in-depth writing).

Our Students at the Center (SAC) writing program had just started when the high-stakes testing regime settled into Louisiana.

The students who started SAC, led by Erica DeCuir and Kenyatta Johnson, were demanding more depth and rigor in their high school courses than the state was providing and planning. Erica believed that for students to learn well and to demonstrate that learning, they needed to write more, expanding on their insights and using multiple sources. Kenyatta argued that for students to succeed in school, they needed to deal with social, emotional, and other issues in their lives that impeded learning. She believed that writing and sharing that writing with classmates was the best way for students to work on this in a school setting that provided insufficient resources for mental health development. Both of them believed that writing can and should be a means for political and community involvement. And all of their classmates wanted more intense, detailed discussion of student writing that happened in the classroom with peers and teachers.

SAC pedagogy grew out of these visions and this climate.

Erica, Kenyatta, their English III classmates, and I did what teachers and students at McDonogh 35 High School (and at other schools across our city and country) have always done. We developed innovations rooted in our experience and expertise as teachers and students and responding to the realities we faced.

In addition to the external realities of public education dilettantes and do-gooders claiming to want to improve schools for other people's children by imposing high-stakes testing using formats and measures that can be "graded" and "reported" quickly and efficiently (and hence measure only the most superficial and lowest common denominators of learning), we were dealing with public schools that were not funded in the first place to provide the highest quality education possible.

The most glaring places where my students expressed their dissatisfaction with their education were in 1) high student-teacher ratios that resulted in too little feedback on their writing in particular and academic preparation in general, 2) education and standards that too often started with general and mainstream assimilation as opposed to the lives, concerns, and culture of students and their families, and 3) emphasis on individual development as opposed to communal and citizen development in the state and national education standards that were beginning to pressure students and teachers.

How did SAC go about using its personnel and concerns to address student educational concerns in context of state and national standards movement?

Our most basic response to the growing high stakes testing regime was to acknowledge that it was not serving the best interest of students and their education. At the same time, we knew there would be pressures to prepare students for these external measures. Our response was rooted in the history of education at McDonogh 35 in particular and across black communities in the U.S. in general: a combination of sticking to what we knew was most important in education and at the same time far exceeding the expectations and demands of those who did not send their children to our schools or to any at which these high stakes tests were required.

The student work in *Go to Jail* illustrates some of the ways we accomplished the education for liberation our students were demanding and their educators knew they deserved.

At SAC we take seriously the lives and experiences of our students, their families, and the communities and cultures in which they were growing. As Kenyatta pointed out, for students to thrive in school, especially those classmates who were not interested or motivated to begin with, they needed to write about realities they knew well and cared for deeply. This approach runs counter to the high stakes testing approach that sets up expectations and punishments external to the student. Student writings in *Go to Jail* are rooted in lived experiences of students and their families.

We use these experiences—”starting with what students know to help them learn what they need to know” is one of our mottos—to bridge students into reading and analyzing demanding and engaging texts. In SAC courses—that since 2009 were also dual enrollment with Bard Early College and earned students 3-4 college credits per course per semester—students read closely texts that included Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave.” James Baldwin’s “My Dungeon Shook,” Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, John Edgar Wideman’s *Brothers and Keepers*, Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Bryan Wagner’s *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery*, and the poetry of Phillis Wheatley and June Jordan’s writing about that poetry. Students wrote academic journals on everything they read. They were not asked to just answer reading check questions but in their own informal writing to ask their own questions of these texts, explore connections to their own experiences and other readings, and to practice close reading of selected passages. In the classroom, their instructors did not lecture them on these readings but rather had students share and discuss what they had written with each other—creating a culture that in a variation of the words of Jerome Morgan and his colleagues in Free-Dem Foundations students “owned” their own thinking and writing.

SAC classes consciously exceed the expectations and measurements of high stakes testing and departments of education. Students write numerous multiple-source essays per semester. These essays examine topics such as the connections among policing and privatization, representations of black lives in popular media, and the possibilities and promise of inverting lessons taught by systems designed for oppression. In essays such as these, students are required to do writing that contributes something new to a field of study while at the same time referencing, analyzing, and discussing what other writers and researchers have produced on their selected topic. The contribution from students comes not only from the experiences of themselves and their classmates but also from their unique readings of course materials. This sort of extended discourse is not measured in state or national testing and hence is seldom taught in schools that emphasize a teaching to the test.

Students in our classes understand and learn that education should not be for individual achievement but for community development. This philosophy demands more breadth and depth to student learning, manifest in SAC courses in activities described in *Go to Jail* that range from studying and participating in multiple ways with a specific court case such as Jerome Morgan’s to mentoring younger students in their high school and in “feeder” elementary schools in a) developing the skills of critical reading, b) extended discourse writing, c) listening to and learning from voices that often don’t make it into the classroom, and c) in general “owning” themselves and their communities.

Our students, just like their friends and family members who are incarcerated, deserve in their educational experiences self- and community-determination, liberation not constraint, extended and meaningful discourse and not drop-down menus for quoting text in standardized test writing prompts.

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LOCAL AND REGIONAL ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM ORGANIZATIONS

Angola 3 News

Regularly updated blog about the national campaign to free the Angola 3 (with Albert Woodfox the sole remaining of the 3) and other political prisoners at Angola State Prison.

<http://my.firedoglake.com/members/angola3news/>

Critical Resistance (CR), New Orleans Chapter

With chapters across the U.S., Critical Resistance seeks to build an international movement to end the prison industrial complex (PIC) by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe.

<http://criticalresistance.org/chapters/cr-new-orleans/>

930 N. Broad St., New Orleans, LA 70119

(504) 304-3784

crno@criticalresistance.org

The House that Herman Built

Exhibit, dialogue, and spatial emancipation project aimed at the abolition of solitary confinement. With Jackie Summal, architect.

<http://hermanshouse.org/>

Resurrection After Exoneration (RAE House)

A Non-profit organization dedicated to the rehabilitation of Exonerees after incarceration.

<http://www.r-a-e.org/home>

1212 St. Bernard Ave. New Orleans, LA 70116

(504) 302-1940

Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana (JJPL)

JJPL's mission is to transform the juvenile justice system into one that builds on the strengths of young people, families and communities to ensure children are given the greatest opportunities to grow and thrive.

<http://jjpl.org/>

1600 Oretha Castle Haley Blvd, New Orleans, LA 70113

(504) 522-5437

Friends and Families of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC)

A statewide membership-based organization that fights for a better life for all of Louisiana's youth, especially those involved in or targeted by the juvenile justice system.

<http://www.fflic.org/>

1600 Oretha C. Haley Blvd., New Orleans, LA 70113

(504) 522-5437

International Coalition to Free the Angola 3

<http://angola3.org/>

Voice of the Ex-Offender (VOTE)

A grassroots, membership-based organization founded and run by Formerly Incarcerated Persons in partnership with allies dedicated to ending the disenfranchisement and discrimination against of FIPs.

<http://vote-nola.org/>

3301 Chartres Street, New Orleans, LA 70117

(504) 943-1901 / (800) 552-VOTE.

Women with a Vision (WWAV)

Created by and for women of color, WWAV is a social justice non-profit that addresses issues faced by women within our community and region. Major areas of focus include Sex Worker Rights, Drug Policy Reform, HIV Positive Women's Advocacy, and Reproductive Justice outreach.

<http://wwav-no.org/>

1001 S. Broad St., Suite 200, New Orleans, LA 70125

(504) 301-0428

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS & OTHER INTERNET RESOURCES

Angola Museum

<http://www.angolamuseum.org>

Thousand Kites

A national dialogue project addressing the criminal justice system.

<http://www.thousandkites.org>

Families Against Mandatory Minimums

<http://www.famm.org/>

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