The magazine of the Northwestern Prison Education Program

NORTHWESTERN INSIDER

VOL. 2 ISSUE 2

An unjust System Destroys Families

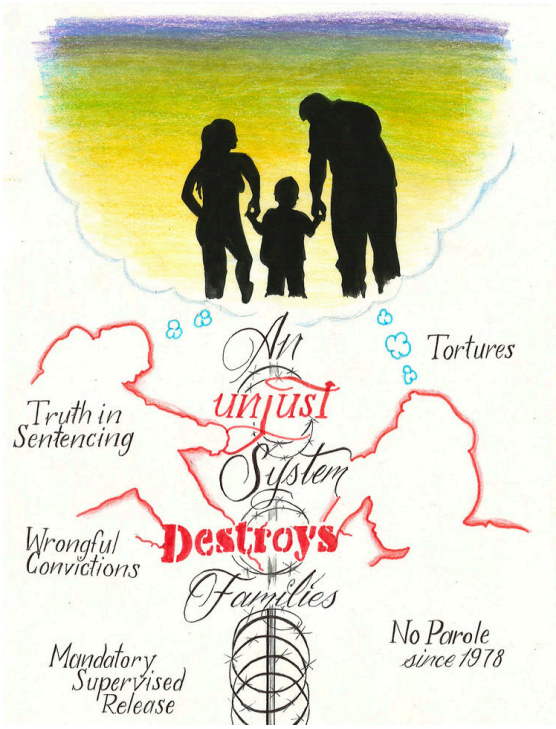
Tortures

Truth in Sentencing

Wrongful Convictions

No Parole since 1978

Mandatory Supervised Release



Behind the Cover

By Ariel Bueno and Hugo Ocon,
the artists behind the Vol. 2, Issue 2 cover

Being incarcerated is not easy. Long bouts of loneliness are intensified by individual struggle. Many of us behind these walls and barbed wire fences understand that we are not alone and that the numerous injustices of the carceral system affect our loved ones in many ways as well.

The struggle and injustice that we all endure each day was the inspiration for this cover illustration, highlighting the injustices that occur throughout the court process and those that continue during incarceration, holding individuals beyond their point of rehabilitation with no meaningful opportunities for reintegration into society while tearing families apart. These injustices include truth-in-sentencing (which requires individuals to serve 85% or 100% of their sentence with no regard to the individuals' rehabilitation); lack of parole (which was abolished in Illinois in 1978); and even mandatory supervised release (which adds three more years of post-release surveillance to an individual's sentence).

The silhouettes represent the image of our families doing time with us and hoping for reunification soon. The sunrise/sunset represents the light at the end of the tunnel, when we can finally leave this dark place behind.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Below and on the following pages are the contributors to Vol. 2, Issue 2 of the *Northwestern Insider*. They are grouped according to the section of the magazine to which they contributed.

FAMILY

BRANDON V. WYATT

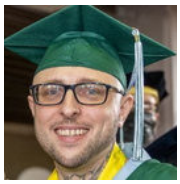
Brandon, a student in Cohort 2, wrote "Stepping Stones" and "A Well of Hope a World Apart."

SHURESE BAILEY

Shurese, a student at Logan Correctional Center, wrote "My Dolores."

SCOT MILLER

Scot, a student in Cohort 4, wrote "Foreign Language" and "Big Black."



TODD MANDOLINE

Todd, a student in Cohort 2, wrote "When My Father Let Me In."

CINDY SHEPHEARD

Cindy, a student at Logan Correctional Center, wrote "Grieving in Prison."

PATTY OUSKA

Patty, a student at Logan Correctional Center, wrote "Treasures."

SHAWN THIGPEN

Shawn, a student in Cohort 3, wrote "A Family's Unbreakable Bond."

THOMAS GORDON

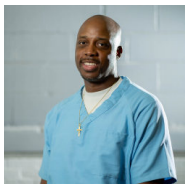
Thomas, a student in Cohort 5, wrote several pieces, including "A Mother's Love."

BRYAN DEAN

Bryan, a student in Cohort 2, wrote "Learning From My Father."

JAMES HALE

James, a student in Cohort 4, wrote "Fatherhood From Prison."



OLIVER CRAWFORD

Oliver, a student in Cohort 4, wrote "Love and Sacrifice: The Key to Parenthood."

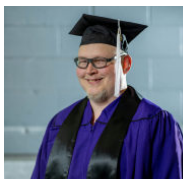
IRENE ROMANIUK

Irene, a student at Logan Correctional Center, wrote "For My Alexandria."

CHELSEA RAKER

Chelsea, a student at Logan Correctional Center, wrote "Me From You."

ESSAYS, INTERVIEWS, & ARTICLES



ANTHONY EHLERS

Anthony, a 2023 NPEP graduate, wrote "The Path of Suffering."

TONY TRIPLETT

Tony, a 2023 NPEP graduate, wrote "Celebrating Family" and "What My Mornings Are Like in Prison."

DONNELL GREEN

Donnell, a student in Cohort 3, wrote "Beyond the Walls."

Interested in contributing to future issues of the *Northwestern Insider*?

Refer to our submission guidelines on page 117.

INSIDER LAW

LEON FIELDS

Leon, a student in Cohort 2, wrote "A Well of Hope a World Apart" and "Are We Our Mothers' Sons?"

PAUL FORBES

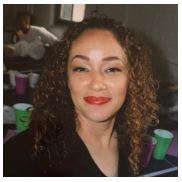
Paul, a student in Cohort 4, wrote "Language of the Law."

LYNN GREEN

Lynn, a 2023 NPEP graduate, edits "Insider Law" and wrote "Why Were We Left Behind?" and "In My Illinois Prison."

ELBONIE BURNSIDE

Elbonie, a student at Logan Correctional Center, wrote "The Youth Left Behind."



MARGARET DEFRANCISCO

Margaret, a student at Logan Correctional Center, wrote "The Youth Left Behind."

SPIRTUALITY

RAMON "BEN KHAYIL" MONTAGUE

Ramon, a student in Cohort 2, wrote "Beyond Religion."

MOTIVATION

FLY MILLER

Fly, a 2024 NPEP graduate, edits the Motivation column and wrote "Stranded on a Bridge."

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

ABDUL-MALIK MUHAMMAD

Malik, a 2023 NPEP graduate, edits the Restorative Justice column and wrote "The Illinois Murder Registry" and "Sheridan Debuts Edovo."

WILLIAM "SHAFIQ" PEEPLES

William, a 2023 NPEP graduate, edits the Spirituality column and wrote on restorative justice for this issue.

JASON SAMUELS

Jason, a student in Cohort 5, wrote "My Mother, My Aunt, My Foundation."

WILL WILLIAMS

Will, a student in Cohort 3, wrote "A Queen Without a Crown."

ANTHONY HARRIS

Anthony, a student in Cohort 5, wrote "Restoring House Harris."

OSCAR GUTIERREZ

Oscar, a student in Cohort 5, drew "House Harris Coat of Arms."

PATRICK COMI

Patrick, a student in Cohort 5, wrote "Crystal Clear" and "Difficulty 2.0."

INSIDE THE CLASSROOM

MELINDA WARFEL

Melinda, a student at Logan Correctional Center, wrote the Lackey Award-winning essay on John Rawls.

DE'ANDRE ROBINSON

De'Andre, a student in Cohort 3, wrote the Lackey Award-winning essay on leveraging social-emotional learning for Black students.

REGINA DEFRANCISCO

Regina, a student at Logan Correctional Center, wrote "Mayonnaise Avengers."

POETRY

JUAN GARNICA

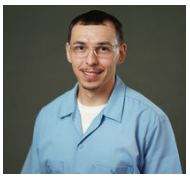
Juan, a student in Cohort 5, wrote and drew "Community Garden."

YAPHET DAVIS

Yaphet, a student in Cohort 4, wrote "A Thousand-Yard Stare."

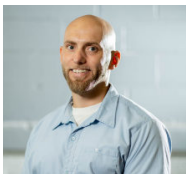
LATOSHA HOWARD

Latosha, a student at Logan Correctional Center, wrote "Say My Name."



NIKOLAS GACHO SR.

Nikolas, a student in Cohort 5, wrote "I Can See."



MICHAEL JORGENSEN

Michael, a student in Cohort 4, wrote "Plea Deal."

DIANDRA SAMUELS

Di, a student at Logan Correctional Center, wrote "Diasporic Blues."

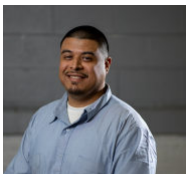
ART

ARIEL BUENO

Ariel, a student in Cohort 5, illustrated several pieces, including "At Odds With Transfers."

JASON GORHAM

Jason, a student in Cohort 3, illustrated many pieces for this issue, including the Lackey Award winner emblem.



HUGO OCON

Hugo, a student in Cohort 3, illustrated several pieces for this issue, including the cover.

TYPISTS

JAMAL JONES

CHRISTOPHER GREATHOUSE

KOBIE SINGLETON

To Our NPEP Community

Dear Reader,

This issue of the *Northwestern Insider* is devoted to family, and the pages that follow are filled with stories that are powerful, generous, and deeply moving.

As I reflect on the many forms that family takes — biological, chosen, and forged through the bonds of shared experience — I can't help but think of my own family and the role they've played in the unfolding story of NPEP. My husband, Baron, and daughters, Izzy and Cat, have been part of this journey since the very beginning as both supporters and active participants who have been essential in shaping NPEP into what it is today.

When NPEP launched in 2018, Izzy was a first-year student at Northwestern herself, and she was one of our original tutors, not only showing up to provide academic support each week to our community members but also actively recruiting other on-campus students to get involved with NPEP. (The photo on the right, above, is Izzy in one of the classrooms at Stateville.) Since then, she has done everything from picking up catering orders for community hours to driving a U-Haul up and down narrow streets from Evanston to the South Side of Chicago to collect and deliver furniture for one of our students who returned home after 27 years of incarceration.

continued on following page

While Cat was originally too young to do in-person work for NPEP, she typed up handwritten assignments from students, added content to the website, and stayed up until all hours of the night baking cookies for holiday celebrations. After she moved out of state for college, she became a correspondence tutor for two of our students. When she learned that the last NPEP commencement would take place during the review sessions for her own final exams, she didn't hesitate to drive more than 12 hours in a roughly 24-hour period of time to ensure that she was present for this monumental moment in the lives of our community members.

And Baron — known to those he's taught in the NPEP community as Professor Reed — has, at one time or another, filled just about every role in NPEP: website designer, academic advisor, professor, business manager, counselor, commencement planner, and so much more. (The photo on the previous page is of Baron, William Peeples, Cat, Robert Cloutier, and me at NPEP's 2023 commencement at Stateville.)

Through it all, my family has never once expressed anything but joy at sharing me with so many other adopted family members, even when this means that I have less time for them. Their open hearts and generous support show me over and over that education, at its core, is a family endeavor that requires a network of commitment, care, and shared values.

As you read the stories in this issue, I hope you're reminded of your own families — those who walk alongside you, uplift you, and believe in your dreams, even when they seem impossibly far away. NPEP is a reflection of many such families, woven together by purpose, driven by enduring hope, and sustained by love.

With gratitude,

Jennifer Lackey
Director, Northwestern Prison Education Program

Family

This issue of the Northwestern Insider celebrates family.

When I was a child, I thought family meant the individuals who looked like me, who shared my name and my bloodline. As I got older, I realized that the definition of family goes beyond namesake and DNA. In this issue of the *Insider*, we take time to acknowledge the people we consider family, the people who love and support us. We uplift their sacrifices and highlight their dedication. As justice-impacted individuals, we have lost much, but family is one of the few things that can't be taken away. In the equation of incarceration, family has always been the common denominator, and ultimately, our community.

We understand the struggle that comes with supporting a loved one behind bars, and we appreciate the dedication to constantly remain in our corner. When your dwelling space is a carceral setting, support from the inside and outside is essential — whether it's letters, pictures, phone calls, cards, or a simple, "Are you okay?"

These small but important gestures remind us that we matter to someone. ◘

— *Tony Triplett, on behalf of the* Insider

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Stepping Stones

On learning to walk alone, thanks to the foundation my parents laid.

By Brandon V. Wyatt

As I grow older, I'm constantly confronted with the lessons and guidance I received from my parents. Even the smallest moments bring back something profound that my mother or father once said.

I remember when my mother caught me cursing up a storm around the age of 8. She gently scolded me about using profanity. Now, if I find myself on a rant with even a splash of vulgarity, I hear her voice reminding me to speak with decency and dignity.

Then there's my father, who taught me that gambling is the equivalent of trying to gain something for nothing. That lesson always surfaces when I think about betting on a basketball game.

These are just a few of the smaller messages I absorbed growing up — there are many, many more.

As I reflect not just on my parents, but on the essence of those lessons and the roles they've played in my life, I've come to a steady realization: my parents were stepping stones. They were a point of departure toward empowerment.

It might sound counterintuitive to call your parents "stepping stones," since most people hold their parents in the highest regard. And believe me — I think the world of mine. I would never minimize their lives or their impact.

But as I consider their parenting style, I now see that their purpose was to set me on the right path, to empower me to act freely in alignment with universal principles like oneness, cause and effect, and attraction.

They worked to build and shape me not just to survive the obstacles life would throw at me, but to transcend even the hidden limitations, including the limitation of depending on them.

Our parents are our first providers. They give us food, clothing, and shelter. Ideally, we grow to trust them to protect us and sacrifice for us. If that goes well, we become capable of expressing the best version of ourselves through their influence.

But how many parents are willing to send their children into the world with full faith that they can find fulfillment and govern themselves? Can our children face trials without fearing failure or immediately reaching back for support?

I believe the deepest goal of parenthood is to raise a child into adulthood with self-determination — into someone who can manifest prosperity, abundance, and steady resolve through all stages of life.

If parents are the master builders of our mental, emotional, cultural, and financial foundations, then surely their goal should be this: to build something that stands strong, even when they walk away.

Parenthood isn't just about raising good children. It's about raising children who can stand on their own, no matter what struggles come their way. ▫

A granddaughter's tribute to the woman who gave her reason to come home.

By Shurese Bailey

Illustration by Hugo Ocon

Dear Grammie,

Let me start by saying — you've always been my heart and soul. I never imagined I'd lose my favorite girl so soon. You've been there for me through everything, and I've always wanted to make you proud. When they told me you had passed away, I wanted to drop to my knees and ask, *How can this be?*

I had been anxiously waiting for November 3 so I could call and say, "Happy birthday, Grammie!" Instead, I got the worst news of my life. My grandmother, Dolores Bailey, had gone home to be with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I knew I shouldn't be sad, but I couldn't help it — the one person I loved most was gone.

Everywhere I turn, I see your angelic face — a face I've seen all my life — and you will always live in my memories.

I remember when I was a little girl and wanted to spend the night with you every weekend. You'd try to get me to sleep in the other bedrooms, but I'd pout until you pulled out the rollaway bed or made me a pallet right next to you. I remember us praying together while "There's a God Who Knows It All" played softly in the background.

I remember my teenage years, too, and the dresses you'd buy that hugged my body. You always said, "You have a beautiful shape and a beautiful face." Even though I hated wearing dresses, I loved seeing your smile and the twinkle in your eyes.

When I got pregnant, you took me to my appointments and stayed right by my side. When I had my C-section, you were there. Before I went to prison, I made sure to visit you every day. And while I was inside, I called you as often as I could, just so we could reminisce.

We'd talk about our bonding moments, like when I gave you pedicures. I'd sit on the floor clipping your nails, and you'd look over your glasses at me until I heard you shout, "Ouch! You're making me bleed!" And I'd say, "Grammie, shhh — it's just a little blood." I'd laugh, and you'd always respond, "I'm not letting you touch me again." But sure enough, the next week, you'd be asking me to do your feet again.

For the past 12 years, I've been trying to get home to you. I still yearn for your touch and miss that beautiful smile. I don't know how to deal with you not being here. I catch myself wanting to call you, but I can't. Wanting to hear your voice, but I can't. I want to feel your loving arms around me, to give you one last kiss goodbye, but I can't.

You were my purpose, Grammie. My reason to come home. And I will keep fighting to make it back. I'm sorry I wasn't there to say goodbye.

But you always said, "Never say goodbye — because goodbyes are forever." So instead, I'll say: See you again one day, when God calls me home.

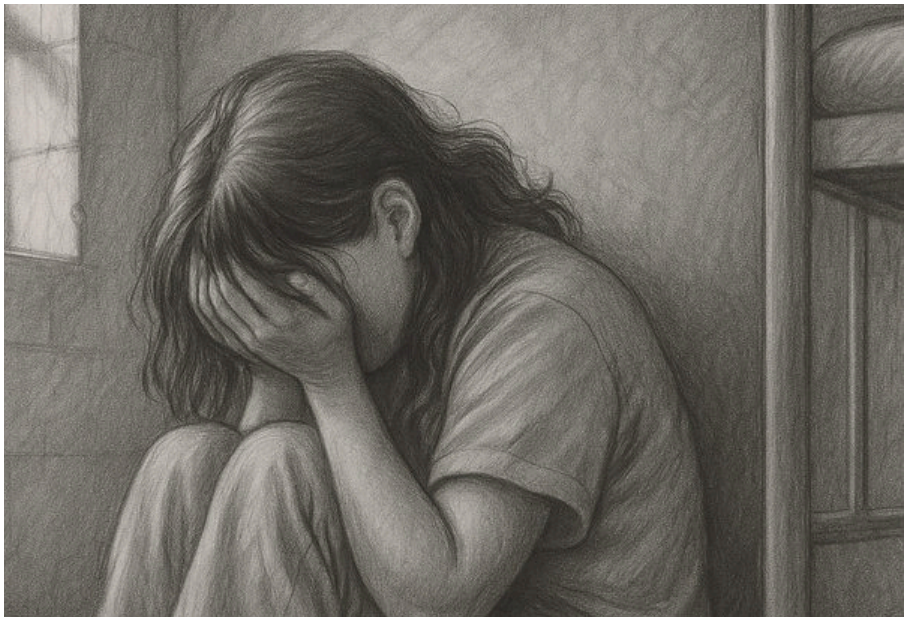
You will never be forgotten. I pray that one day I will be even half the woman you were. You'll always be the most precious woman in the world to me. Loving you for life.

Your granddaughter,
Rese

Grieving in Prison

What it means to mourn when no one can hold you.

By Cindy Shepheard



How does one truly grieve while in prison? One doesn't — not fully, not completely.

You may be eligible for a funeral furlough, but that only works if you anticipate the passing well in advance, and if you can afford the fees. The approval process takes a minimum of 30 days. And if it's granted, the individual in custody is required to pay for mileage, gas, and the day wages of the accompanying officers, all in advance. Most applications don't get approved.

And even if you are granted a furlough, let's be honest: Who wants to wear shackles, waist chains, and cuffs for hours just to spend 15 minutes with the deceased? You're not allowed to speak with other family or friends. It's just you, your loved one, and two armed correctional officers who may or may not have compassion.

Forgive my cynicism. In 2016, my father passed after a long battle with colon cancer. I rarely got the chance to see him because he had been too ill to travel, but he surprised me with a visit on my birthday. I spoke with him the Sunday before he died. I told him how much I loved him and assured him that if he was tired, it was okay to get some rest. My mom and I would be fine.

That was in June. My brother hanged himself in September of the same year.

I was just numb. None of it seemed real. I knew they were gone, but when I called, I still expected one of them to answer the phone.

In 2019, my mom was diagnosed with terminal lung disease. She died five years later, in 2024. Illness, old age, and the toll of mourning my father wore her down. She passed away in a state-run nursing home with a nurse sitting beside her, holding her hand.

I have no living siblings. All of my aunts, uncles, and grandparents have passed. Even my few cousins are gone.

I'm sad, angry, beside myself. I want to scream at everyone. I'm heartbroken. I cry a lot most days.

I've been sad before. I've shed tears for other family members who passed away. But this time, it broke me. Losing my dad, my brother, and finally my mother. I stopped wearing the mask of my former self.

I couldn't express this to the mental health staff at Logan. If I did, they would classify me as suicidal and place me naked in a strip cell with a heavy, Velcro, suicide-proof canvas smock, with no blanket or toilet paper. This would supposedly be for my safety, so I could not hurt myself. However, those actions only exacerbate the pain, loss, and humiliation.

I am not suicidal; I'm in pain. I'm just a small, wounded child who really wants her mom. I want her wisdom. Her laughter. Her understanding. Her life experience. Her silly humor. Her storytelling, even if I already heard the same story 100 times. I want her.

My mom and I became incredibly close after I was arrested. She was one of the few people who truly believed me and believed in me. She used to say, "I promise I will be there to bring you home."

So it crushed us both when she finally said, "Honey, I don't think I'm gonna be able to keep my promise." But I already knew that.

Her passing has changed the way I see everything. I still hold onto hope — for new laws, for release in the next couple of years. But I carry a sadness I've never known before, an emptiness that nothing seems to fill. Will it ever be filled?

Grieving in prison is a challenge most people will never understand. Most days, I just want to be left alone. I don't eat much or sleep much. Sometimes I shower at 2 a.m. My mind races. I drift through music, TV, and homework, but my focus is shot, like "short attention span theater."

Fortunately, I have a few people in here who feel like family. I can truly cry with them. *Really* cry: ugly, snot-nosed, red-faced, swollen-eyed crying.

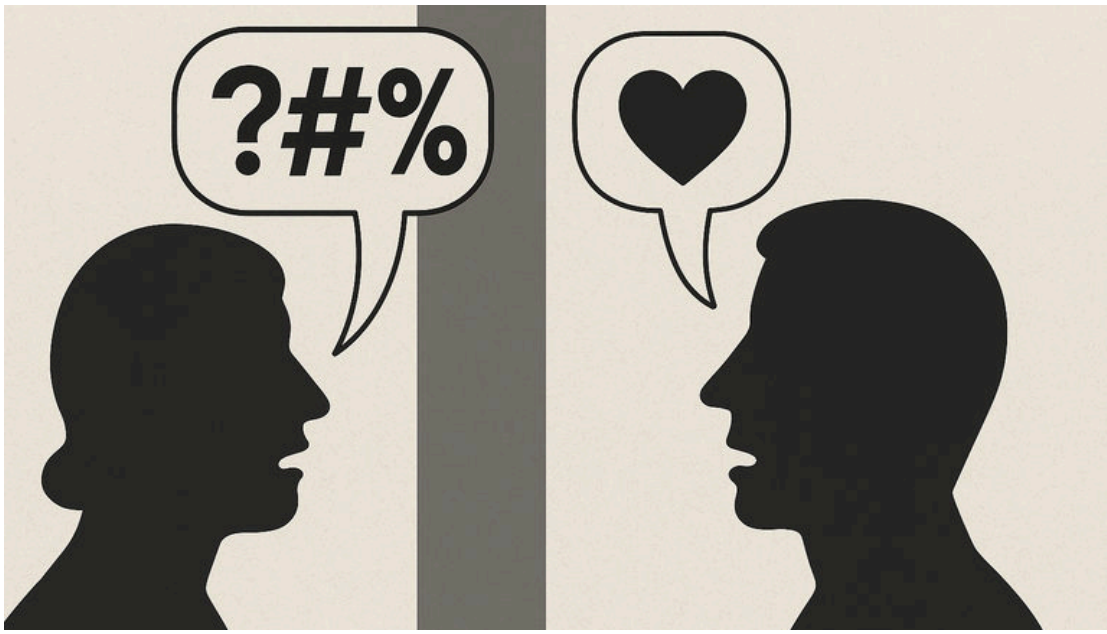
And despite my grief — or maybe because of it — I know I will make it. I'm Ellen's daughter. I'm Vickie's biological daughter.

Ellen Sue Collins, you are so deeply missed. I miss you, Mom.

Foreign Language

Decoding the language my father had been speaking all along.

By Scot Miller



Parents are difficult to understand even in the best of times.

Most of my life my dad, Ron, has seemed like he was from a different planet and spoke a foreign language. He never shared much of his life's story with us, and to this day I am still trying to piece together the puzzle that is my father. He is an austere man. Although he was usually deadpan, he wasn't without a sense of humor. When we were growing up, my dad didn't often prank us or play around, but occasionally he would say some witty comment making one of us kids the butt of the joke. He loved watching old sitcoms, and I would hear him laughing out loud while watching reruns of *M*A*S*H* or *All in the Family.*

My dad was very affectionate when we were children. I remember when he came home from work, my brother and I would race to the door to jump into his arms, hugging and kissing him. Once my sister was born he didn't want to be separated from her.

Some of my most vivid memories of my father were of the crazy gifts he would give for Christmas. Every year, he would buy us presents that none of us wanted — or at the very least, a bad version of a thing that we vaguely desired.

Occasionally, one of us would receive a gift that another sibling actually did want. I remember that he bought my brother a robot named 2XL. This robot played cassette tapes with all types of scientific information on them. The thing was, my brother hated robots and science, whereas I loved both. If I asked about the gift mixup, Dad would say, "I knew one of y'all wanted it." At the time, I thought that his weird gifts were just one of his idiosyncrasies.

My father gave nicknames to everyone in the family: he called me "Hillbilly" because I didn't like wearing shoes. My little sister was "Stinky-Winkey" or "Stink" for short, because of an accident she had in the bathtub as a toddler. My older brother was "Gushy-Main." I have no idea why my father called him that. There's no doubt that the nicknames are terms of endearment, yet the names add to the enigma that is my dad. My siblings and I never used these monikers for each other, but as young adults we teased each other about the bizarre nicknames that Dad gave us. To us, the names were just another piece of his mysterious mind.

Like most younger brothers, I looked up to my older brother, so when he joined the Boy Scouts I wanted to join too. My dad became a Scoutmaster so he could spend time with his boys. We all enjoyed camping trips, earning merit badges, and doing things together as a family. Things began to change in my preteen years, though.

My brother became interested in sports, which meant I became interested in sports. Unfortunately, my dad was never into sports. I found out that I was not a bad athlete, so I became more involved in football, eventually leading to me leaving the Scouts.

At the time, I didn't realize how much leaving the Scouts might have hurt my dad, though he never said so. Then again, he wasn't the type to say anything. His disappointment showed in quiet detachment.

He wasn't as involved in what I did at school or in my extracurricular activities, and I couldn't understand why. I desperately wanted him to show up to my games to cheer me on, but he always had to work. I assumed his retreat from me was because he thought we didn't need as much attention as we had when we were younger. Sometimes, however, it felt like he didn't care as much as he once did. It never occurred to me that my actions may have hurt him, especially since I saw him as unassailable.

As the years went by, the gulf between us grew. My father and I didn't talk much once I started high school. Part of it was my newfound independence as a teenager, but I also didn't feel much effort on his part. He still gave us crazy gifts, and he attended all the major events in my life, but the relationship wasn't the same. The connection seemed damaged, and as a result, I began to feel indifferent toward him, mostly out of hurt.

My father worked the midnight shift, which meant that he normally slept during the day. His schedule allowed me to cut class and hang out with my friends at our house, provided that we didn't wake him. At our house my friends and I would dip into my parents' liquor stash. I was a shy kid and I quickly learned that I could get rid of my shyness by getting lost in alcohol. I soon began to drink excessively because I liked the way alcohol made me outgoing to the point where I was rarely sober. Looking back, I may have been fighting a much larger demon than shyness: depression.

Eventually I began to abuse marijuana as well as alcohol, though I still managed to maintain good grades. I started to hang out with people who may have been considered "bad influences" and had a couple of run-ins with the law. No doubt my father saw his baby boy spiraling out of control. At this time the crack epidemic hit our neighborhood, and my family saw our community change for the worse. Being able to sustain good grades may have been the only reason that my parents didn't have a full-fledged intervention for me.

During this time, the late '80s, many of my friends' parents were divorcing or their fathers were simply leaving. My father stayed. I don't believe my father knew how to correct the path I was on or the trouble I was getting into. I was hanging out and becoming more involved in the streets; my behavior worked as even more of a wedge between us.

Miraculously I was able to graduate high school and get accepted into Tuskegee University. The day that I left for college, my parents drove me to the airport. As I was unloading my luggage from the car, my dad discreetly slipped me some money without my mother noticing.

It felt like a spark of our old bond had been rekindled. I distinctly remember sitting on the plane, reminiscing about my childhood and the times my dad and I would share root beer floats together.

Unfortunately, after a couple of years, I dropped out of college and returned home. I was embarrassed that I had let my family and myself down. My father never said anything to me about my failure. He ignored it, and me. The chasm between us returned.

For years our rift remained. There was no hostility, but the silence between us was more heartbreaking than any argument could have been. My siblings also felt my father's emotional departure. They grew angry, while I became apathetic. To me, my father no longer cared and I didn't either.

That changed when I was arrested for a major crime. As soon as I was taken into custody, my father moved heaven and earth to secure an attorney for me. Unbeknownst to me, shortly after my arrest, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. I can only imagine what my dad was going through mentally — fighting wars on two fronts while working the graveyard shift. What I do know is that my father attended every single one of my court appearances, many of which lasted only a few minutes. His presence helped sustain me through the most difficult time in my life.

Seeing him show up for brief and insignificant court hearings forced me to reevaluate my perception of my father's love. My trial ended in a guilty verdict, and my father took the stand in an effort to mitigate my prison sentence. Initially, I was apprehensive about my father testifying on my behalf because I felt that I had already put my family through so much and I did not want to add more to the burden.

Approximately four years after I was transferred from the county jail to the state prison, my mother was placed on

> "I hadn't understood it then, but now, with this book in my hands, I could finally see it: the joy, the intent, the meaning behind what he had been saying all along."

hospice. Sadly, she passed away on Mother's Day in 2004. Up until that point, she had been my rock and comforter. With her gone, I didn't know how I was going to survive what amounted to a life sentence. To my surprise my father stepped in to fill the gap in a major way.

My father and I began speaking on the phone weekly, which was unusual for us. At first, our conversations were awkward and superficial; it was like I was getting to know a stranger. He made sure that I was able to speak to my son who would spend weekends with him. I couldn't help but have a new appreciation for my father.

Years later, as I was participating in an inside-out dads class, I borrowed a book titled *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman. This book was like the Rosetta Stone to my father's enigmatic mind. It showed me that people express their love in various ways, one of them being "gifts of love." I read the chapter on gifts over and over, reminiscing on the presents my father gave.

Replaying the images of past holidays and considering how my father sat transfixed on watching our reactions as we opened gifts made my breath catch. I hadn't understood it then, but now, with this book in my hands, I could finally see it: the joy, the intent, the meaning behind what he had been saying all along.

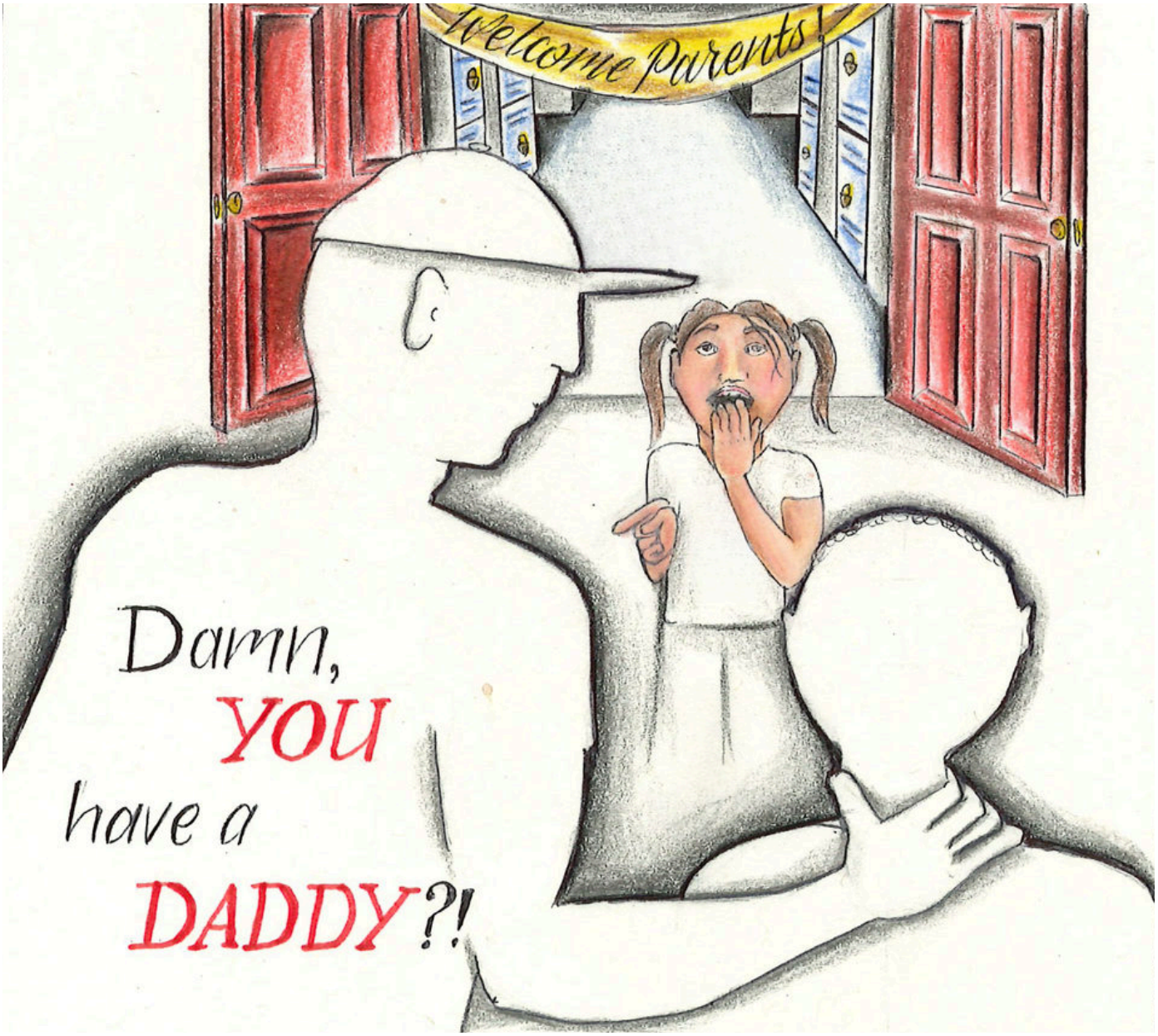
Love Languages caused me to think back to when I was a kid and my father would take me to the mall to pick out presents for the family. He would spend, what seemed to my adolescent mind, an eternity selecting greeting cards when all that I wanted to do was get to the toy store. I hadn't a clue that what he was so painstakingly searching for was the perfect card that expressed his love toward his family. These cards were his way of laying his soul bare to us. I was focused on the presents when the true gift was the text of the cards. It all made sense now; he had been sharing his feelings all of my life, but I wasn't listening. I had been discarding the cards, and thus, his feelings. I understand now that his gift-giving was an outward manifestation of his love and thoughtfulness.

Another of my father's love languages that Chapman notes is "acts of service," which means that he tends to articulate his love much more eloquently with actions rather than with words. His service was expressed in multiple ways, such as by showing up to every court hearing. His paternal service became apparent to me when I observed him navigating the predatory financial practices imposed on the families of prisoners by the Department of Corrections. He never abandoned my struggle in prison even when those hardships caused him to sacrifice an excessive amount of personal and financial capital.

My dad has been through so much: triple bypass heart surgery, amputation of one leg, a heart valve replacement, a pacemaker implantation, and dialysis three times a week. My father's strength is incontrovertible. When Dad was having heart surgery, he flatlined during the procedure and had to be resuscitated. When I spoke to him post-op, the only thing he wanted to talk about was me and how I was doing in school. His dedication to family is mind-blowing.

My father was also instrumental in my maintaining longstanding familial bonds, none as notable as the bond with my son. My dad unceasingly continued to attend to the needs of my family and me, even when going through health challenges.

After all this time I finally got it — I learned to speak Ron. Even now, I attempt to teach the rest of my family to comprehend my father's love language. It's not easy, but he deserves to be understood. Despite all the tribulations my father has stared down, he always puts his family first. It took all of my life, but I am glad that I have finally become fluent in my father's love language. ▪



Promises, verbal spars, a higher power — and an understanding that love will conquer all.

By Donnell Green

Illustration by Ariel Bueno

Damn, you have a daddy? Yeah, I do. If I had a dollar for every time I was asked this, I would have enough to cover attorney fees.

My friends have heard this story: As far back as third grade, when I'd misbehave in class, my teacher would make a phone call and, like a genie, my dad would appear outside the classroom door with a scowl that rivaled '90s Ice Cube. My classmates, surprised, would spout "You have a daddy?!" At the time, I wished this wasn't the case because just the thought of him kept me in line.

Sometimes the teacher would place his number on my desk without saying a word. I wanted nothing to do with an upset dad. He was tough. He had survived Jim Crow Mississippi, where violence against Black bodies was a common occurrence and prospects of economic progress had a ceiling that was among the lowest in the nation. For him, the Marine Corps was a practical solution until he succumbed to an injury, leading to withdrawal and a move to Chicago.

There, he entered into the '70s–'80s drug epidemic and remained there for a while, sleeping on the streets, eating out of trash cans. He's been shot,

beaten, and left inches from death, ironically experiencing the same fate he attempted to escape in Mississippi. During this time, his lifestyle prevented him from envisioning a future until he had a dream about having another son, one who would atone for his shortcomings — so he asked my mother to have me.

The logistics of how to raise me in a healthy environment were an afterthought. Fortunately, he escaped the '90s incarceration boom, and he stuck around to make his presence known to me. He credits his resilience to a prayer whispered many moons ago, which may've also helped him avoid the dark abyss that seemed to have swallowed up my friends' dads. Truthfully, there is no abyss — only structures that negatively impact urban communities while providing rooms in state-run facilities.

Having a daddy not only made me stand out from my classmates. It also distinguished me from my siblings. Out of the six siblings in my mother's house, I was the only one with a concerned dad. Even though he did not live with me, I felt his presence. My dad's power and wisdom showed me that I didn't have to repeat the destructive behavior. Instead he would tell me I was special enough to break a generational curse, and somewhere deep down I believed him.

I relished the weekends I spent at his house. Seeing his white Blazer coming up the street made me seven feet tall. I remember the love we got at the barbershop, our trips to the movies, and the smell of his cologne. Those times shaped my moral code, and that's where I get my impeccable dress style from.

Although at the time life kept us apart, my dad's love for me fueled his fight for sobriety. I watched him battle back with humility. He promised that by the time I was 13, he would be ready to raise me in a functioning home. Periodically, he would check in and let me know things were on schedule. We even spent time in his room at the Salvation Army. At those moments, I watched him intensely, and his character never swayed despite his circumstances. My respect for him grew.

By the time I turned 13, he fulfilled his promise. He rescued me from dysfunction and provided me with the choice to live in a healthy home. I was torn over the decision to leave my mother and siblings in Chicago, but in order to grow, I had to go after the life that my dad fought so hard for.

Ironically, though, life with my dad was more than I could handle at the time. As hard as my dad fought to give me a chance at a productive life, I was overwhelmed by the pressure to make up for his shortcomings. The more he pushed me to be great, the more I shut down. I still respected his scowl and the discipline he instilled, but I was careful not to excel academically or show gratitude for the life he provided. I learned to live in a gray area of concentrated blasé.

Still, to my chagrin, he paid attention to every second of my life. Family members would ask, "Why Donnell?" I wondered the same and thought he should save it for his other sons. But his love was relentless.

Now as I write this, sitting here as an incarcerated son, I am choking on tears because his love is still relentless. I can call on him for anything. He is my cheat code against presentism. If I need to know what the 70-year-old version of myself would do, all I need to do is ask his thoughts on a particular situation. Although we've had our ups and downs, it's year 17 of my 35-year sentence, and he still has me convinced that I was destined to break a generational curse.

From my position, it's unclear if I'm a curse-breaker, though I do understand the nurturing act of a dad speaking life into his son. These days, I am embracing the responsibility I have to my siblings to impact them positively and to share knowledge.

Despite the arguing through the years, he's my champion fighter, and his main goal is to see me free once again. I fought hard and rebelled against his rules — now I put that fight into forging our bond and learning an oral history of our family. Our 20-minute phone calls are not enough, so we schedule visits to crack jokes and take pictures that will embarrass him. (I tried to take a pic kissing him on the cheek, but staff said no contact is allowed.)

Our relationship is proof that love conquers all. Recently, my name was called for visitation. My neighbor asked, "Who was it?" I responded, "My old man." He then shouted from his cell, "Nell, you have a daddy?!" I laughed because I understood.

I love you, pops. ▪

When My Father Let Me In

After years of distance, illness and vulnerability brought us together.

By Todd Mandoline

Since my arrest in July 2012, the most difficult relationship that I had to work on was the relationship with my father.

Strangely, at the beginning of 2024, something changed with my father. I truly believed that God answered the prayers that I had been sending His way on this connection with my father. My father's memory, attention, and cognitive abilities seemed to be slipping since his 75th birthday, and it hadn't been easy to watch. Then, in July of 2024, my father was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, shaking my family to its core and revealing a possible reason behind his change.

Maybe the profound statements he dropped on me as he hugged me before leaving the Stateville visiting room were brought on by his personal struggle trying to grapple with his own mortality. Quite possibly, it was the minor stroke before his cancer diagnosis that led him to be more open and become vulnerable with his only child.

In January 2024, during a visit, I told my father that I knew, without a doubt, that he loved me. However, I felt like he didn't like me. A week later, as we hugged at the end of our visit, my father asked me, "Why would you think that I hate you?" For the entire week, this was on his mind, and his mind transformed "not like" into "hate."

For my father, this interaction was huge and cracked open an emotional door, which had never happened before, allowing me to slowly build on this breakthrough moment in our future phone calls and visits.

On Father's Day 2024, while in the visiting room at Stateville Correctional Center, my father dropped another bomb on me: "I hope that you can forgive me for all the mistakes I made." What? I wanted to lay it on him, all of the things that I felt he could have done differently. I couldn't do it. At age 36, with 13 of those years being incarcerated, I've been able to figure out things. More importantly, I have been able to let go of any animosity or blame.

I responded, "Dad, you don't have to apologize for anything. I know that every choice you made for better or worse came out of unconditional love for me. You did what you thought was best, and I recognize that today. I'm the one who needs to say sorry."

As I reflect on the progress in communicating with my father, I have to pause and thank God. In late 2023, I was ready to throw in the towel and accept defeat. It was as if I would never get him to open up beyond the surface of emotions, the level of topics, and communicating as a family.

I've told this story to a couple of close family and friends who have known my father for more than 25 years. None of them could believe the steps my father has taken. For years, I have heard "Well, that's your dad, Todd." His generation didn't open up and share emotions and feelings.

I guess we hit the emotional lottery because it has been a miracle to have my dad take these steps.

I never thought I'd get this version of my dad. And while I wouldn't wish for the pain that brought us here, I'm grateful for the conversations we're having now — however late, however fragile. ▫

Treasures

The importance of sibling bereavement.

By Patty Ouska

To those who have lost a sibling while incarcerated: When I close my eyes, memories of my brother Joey fill my mind with treasures. When my brother Joey died, I suffered tremendously, alone. Siblings are too often neglected and experience "disenfranchised" grief, a loss that is not openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported. I am bringing sibling grief out of the shadows.

Joey and I had a profoundly strong attachment to one another. At 13, I had to make a "big adult" decision. If my brother and I stayed at home, we surely would have been killed. My brother was 11 when the two of us left with only the clothes on our backs and entered what I deem the carceral system, a system with many interconnected liaisons: shelters, foster homes, group homes, juvenile detention, supervision, jail, prisons, probation, parole, electronic detention, mental health facilities, immigration detention centers.

We faced many challenges together. Our childhood was filled with abuse. We did not choose the life that was handed to us. We were children when we entered the carceral system. All we had was each other. At 21, I was sentenced to a term of natural life without parole, and I entered prison. My brother did five prison terms along with me. Throughout our incarceration we remained close. I talked to my brother every day. In between the times he was not incarcerated, we kept in touch by phone calls, mail, and visits. The phone calls were very expensive, but he made sure I would be able to call him. My brother was the only one who understood me, the only one who understood prison inside.

Two days before my brother was about to be released from prison for the fifth time, the love of his life, Carol, passed away. Now, coming home to a home that was no more, he had to begin his life over without her. Although he did his best to cope, he was very depressed and turned to heroin to numb his pain. On June 18, 2018, my brother passed away from a heroin overdose suicide. When I received the news about my brother, it felt like I had received a blow to my stomach and all the air left my body. From that point on, I was frozen and felt like a zombie.

Incarceration on top of losing a sibling is frightening. I had a new identity: I was the unthinkable — a sister who had lost a brother. I had to deal with the coroner, the funeral home, signing a cremation authorization form, and arranging to have time with my brother's remains in the chaplain's office.

I keep thinking about what I could have done or shouldn't have done. The first year, I completely stopped all communication with anyone on the outside. I was being very selfish. I felt that if I couldn't have all that I had with Joey, then I would not have it with anyone else. I lost some special people during my grieving. In the six years since Joey's death, I have continued on an emotional roller coaster of disbelief, anger, frustration, and guilt.

There is a place inside that carries the weight of my brother's ashes. I will never get to see him again, see him smile, or hear him laugh again. All of these thoughts leave me with a lump in my chest, because my brother and I made plans. Losing my brother has given me a reevaluation of life that I never wanted.

There is a constant ache in my heart for all the memories we won't get to share together.

However, there is also goodness. It has brought me to a better understanding of who I am as a person, to see the preciousness of my life and those close to me. It has made me stronger.

Siblings are not secondary mourners. We share a history, common memories. The ensuing loneliness and grief are a heavy burden to carry, especially in prison. You have nowhere to grieve. Sibling grief must be acknowledged and validated.

In closing, I return and close my eyes. Memories revisited are treasures. Losing a sibling is like an ocean. Emotions ebb and flow. Sometimes the waves are rocky, sometimes the water is calm. I know how to swim, but I was drowning. To put it differently, I experience survivor's guilt. To those in the free world whom I hurt during my grieving, I deeply apologize. I was not in a good space, and I was hurting.

Today, I am here on behalf of my brother Joey and all of you in the carceral system who have lost a sibling. I have been given another "life sentence" — one without my brother. This is my "new life." Who am I if I am not a sister? Who are you without your sibling? I miss my brother every day and wish I could tell my brother all that I've been doing since we last spoke, but I cannot.

We will not get over our grief; we will get through our grief. The grief becomes a part of who we are. The world may not acknowledge sibling grief, but I see you, I hear you, I acknowledge you.

In loving memory of all our siblings,
Patty Ouska

A Mother's Love

Understanding the strength and sacrifice of a mother's unconditional love.

By Thomas J. Gordon

This was not going to be an easy phone call to make. I was calling my mother to break her heart ... yet again.

The difference, this time, was that it would be for good, at least in my mind. I had just come to jail at the age of 26 and had been dealing with feelings of unworthiness. I felt that my mother had raised me to be a better person. All the things she had taught me over the years were gone in a matter of moments. And it was for this reason that I was about to call her. So many things ran through my mind as I picked up the telephone. Thoughts swirling like a whirlwind tornado.

As I dial her number, I am not looking forward to the conversation. In fact, I want to get it over with quickly, which I figure will help to lessen the pain I am about to feel. The phone is ringing, obviously not in tune with the Jumanji-like thumping of my heartbeat. My mother finally answers. I hesitate for a moment, not wanting to give her the dreaded news, but I finally decide to say it: I tell her that I am no longer her son.

As I tell her this, I think back to when I was growing up, when things were much simpler, safer. My mother had always made sure to provide for my brothers and me. We generally had home-cooked meals; one of my favorites was the meatloaf that she would make. Other times she would declare a "fend for yourself" night. In other words, Mom was exhausted, which wasn't always a bad thing. It just meant I had free rein over my dinner that night! While I never had any complaints at the dinner table, this just gave me an opportunity to load up on my favorites. Every child's dream, right?

Even after a long day of work, she would still be "working" at home, making sure her boys had clean clothes to wear, as well as a warm bed to snuggle into each night. This last part always came with a routine hug and kiss goodnight, despite having possibly made her mad. These were just some of the things that were hard for me to reckon with as I sat on the phone, the silence closing in on me, waiting for my mother's response.

When she finally spoke, all she said was "Thomas," but she said it softly, slowly, almost with a sound of defeat. All at once, I heard so many things being said: *I love you. I wish you didn't feel that way. I wish I could fix it. Why does my son keep doing this to me? How much more can I take? What more do I say?*

As difficult as it was for me to acknowledge, I knew she was hurt again by my selfish feelings and emotions.

I seemed to have done that a lot throughout my childhood, hurt my mother's feelings. It had to do with the lack of clarity and understanding I had at that point in my life. As a young child, I just figured she was telling me what to do. *Sit down and do your homework. We're running late for your doctor's appointment. We are going back to the store and you are going to tell them you stole that bubble gum. If you think I am going to let you sit here and enjoy yourself after you were suspended from school, you got another thing coming*. I heard all that and more over the years. Of course, that's not how it always was, but these things really began to strain our relationship, especially when I was being treated with her "tough love."

I had begun to go through some behavior and disability difficulties during my formative years. Let me bring you into the fold for a moment. She was the store manager of a local gas station and convenience store. One day, when duty called, we had to go up there for a bit so she could take care of a few things. Well, I took it upon myself to take some items off the shelf and put them into my pockets for no other reason than that I wanted these things (and likely because I knew she would say no).

At one point, my mom came out of her office and her eyes lasered in on me the way a mother's eyes can. When she asked me what I was doing, I tried to answer innocently, but of course, she could see right through me — and my pockets. She put her hands on the counter, looked at me, and in that firm but quizzical way that told me she already knew the answer to the question she was about to ask, she said, "Thomas, what's in your pockets?" Busted, but still I lied, hoping not to incur the wrath of my mother. As I said, she could see right through me; she was hard to fool.

She told me to "come here" with a look that said it was not the time to put up a fight. I walked slowly up to the counter, head down, dejected, trying not to think about what was going to happen. As she made me empty my pockets of the assortment of things you might find down a typical convenience store candy aisle, I could see her gears turning, getting angrier by the second. Not only did I just steal, but I stole from her store, while she was at work. This story ends with my mother turning me in to my probation officer, who then extended my term of probation. While that was just one example, she had to do this on at least two other occasions, when she turned me in to the police.

Those were tough moments in my life. There were times when I had chosen not to talk with her, when I pushed her out of my life. I thought I had all the answers, that she couldn't tell me anything I didn't already know.

Thinking back to that phone call, I've realized a few things. My mother's love at that moment in my life was bigger than the tallest mountain and stronger than any structure built to withstand the worst natural disaster; it always was.

And although we haven't always had the best of relationships, this is only because of my lack of insight into how truly remarkable a mother is to her children. Even more so, through all of our struggles, her love has remained constant, a true image of love.

As I am reminded of all that she has done over the years — countless doctor's appointments, parent-teacher conferences, sacrificed time and energy that she gave to me and not my brothers — I realize that my mother was still able to maintain a balance between all these things. I didn't see it at the time, but she was doing all she could to ensure the best possible outcome for my life. I shall call my mother the joyful, juggling, jim-dandy, jack-of-all-trades!

Throughout all these years, she has been the most consistent factor in my life, her and her unwavering love. My mother has made so many sacrifices for me not only during the course of my childhood, but also through my incarceration. This has allowed me to really appreciate the person that she is and the relationship I now have with her. She is more than my mother; she is my friend! She is and always has been. I have now understood her true value: priceless.

I had a conversation with my mother recently. She told me in so many words that she was sorry for "pampering" me all the time, trying to protect me from getting hurt. Although that was the gist of the conversation, I mostly disagree with her. As a parent, she has displayed much patience, kindness, care, and understanding. Through these characteristics, she has shown me what it means to be there for your child, through thick and thin; she has taught me how to be a better parent. For this, I am forever grateful. I hope that I can pass on the same values to my daughter, who can then pass them on to her future children, and so on. An eternity of love, all because of one person's efforts.

Mom, thank you for investing in my well-being and showing me what it truly means to value a person and love them unconditionally.

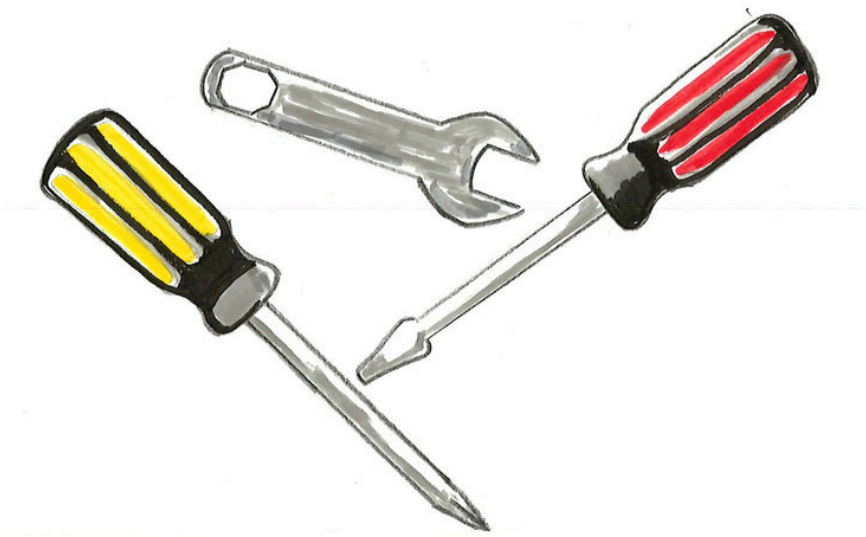
I LOVE YOU! ▪

Learning From My Father

Everything I needed to know, I learned from him.

By Bryan Dean

Illustration by Hugo Ocon



What assumptions do you have about people who never make it to high school? Dumb? Perhaps unreliable?

I know a man who never made it to high school, and he is one of the wisest people I know: my father. Though he didn't go far in the traditional educational route, my father has an incredible knowledge base that has proved invaluable throughout his life and mine. Through the course of our many years and interactions together, I'm fortunate to have learned much from my father, including how to be "handy."

My father is a 69-year-old Black man. Born in Georgia in the 1950s, he personally witnessed and experienced racism on a regular basis — on his walks to and from school, inside the actual schoolhouse, and later in life when searching for jobs. Though my father admittedly didn't perform well in school, he found other ways to engage his mind and show his intelligence.

When I read Mike Rose's essay "Blue-Collar Brilliance," I saw my father reflected in Rose's Uncle Joe. My father is incredibly savvy at working with and fixing machines, making alterations of his own creation to strengthen their operation (or to avoid future breakdowns), and demonstrating his skill in a way that allows others to learn — assuming he has the time to teach, and you want to learn.

I started learning from my father in early childhood. I was a very blessed child. I had toys, a television, and a Nintendo. I thought that was normal. Everybody gets these things, right? It wasn't until my father mentioned that he hadn't had those luxuries in his childhood that I realized how lucky I was. But of course, I had to ask: If you didn't have Nintendo, what did you do for fun?

My father helped me imagine. Growing up in the hilly lands of Georgia, my father, his brothers, and their neighborhood friends would race wagons and carts down long hills. When my dad told me these stories, I pictured hot, sunny days with vibrant grass on either side of a long, exhilarating hill — an idyllic scene where the kids raced in fierce competition. When I asked how they managed to get the wagons and carts, he told me, "We built them."

Can you imagine my awe at 5 or 6 years old hearing that? They built them? Where? How? They were kids. Could I build one? Never mind that we lived on the flat streets of Chicago. I wanted to race a cart down a hill.

As far back as I can remember, my father was always a particularly handy individual. He was a foreman at a factory with enormous injection molding machines. On the occasions I went to work with him, I learned that my dad was the go-to person anytime a machine malfunctioned — especially if it had completely stopped working. I'd watch in awe as he maneuvered around, under, and sometimes on top of the machines, fearlessly fixing whatever the problem was. He was confident but careful. He knew people had lost digits and limbs in those machines, but he also knew what he was doing.

The first few times I asked to help fix a machine, of course, his response was a stern "No." I'd be upset, wanting to learn and be like him. "Go stand over there," he'd say, directing me to a spot where I could watch him and where he could also keep an eye on me.

One day at the factory, we arrived before his shift started. We walked to the cabinet that housed his toolkit. As he began examining his tools, he pointed to specific ones, telling me their names. An unexplainable excitement grew within me.

Though I was just learning what a flathead and Phillips head screwdriver were, I felt like I was becoming like him. That day he let me "help." As he worked on a machine, he'd tell me which screwdriver to grab. Patiently, he'd correct me when I brought the wrong one. "No, that's a Phillips. The big flathead has the green handle." I'd return with the correct tool, intent on remembering that the flathead had, well, a flat head.

Sometimes, when we were at home, people from the factory would call my dad to come in and fix something they couldn't figure out. He'd ask if I wanted to go with him, and I'd happily tag along. Some of the people there were well educated and had degrees, but Pops knew how to solve problems that left them stumped.

Outside of work, his skill proved just as valuable — around the house, for relatives and friends, and for a video-game-obsessed version of me. When my Nintendo controller stopped working one day, I asked my dad to buy me a new one.

"What's wrong with the one you got?" he asked.

"It broke! It won't work!"

Calmly, he walked over, put a hand on my shoulder, and said, "We're gonna fix it." I sat enthralled, watching everything he did, soaking it all in. After he put the controller back together and checked that it worked, I opened up my second controller — the one I reserved for cousins and guests — and I repeated all the same steps myself.

Catching on to what I was doing, my father watched as I reassembled the controller, plugged it into the Nintendo, and started the game.

"It works!" I shouted.

He smiled wide, gave me a quick "Yup," and walked into his room while I got lost in the game.

I'd just learned how to open something, examine its components, and put it back together correctly. That gave me a little bit of knowledge, skill, and confidence. Soon I was exploring the inner workings of other things as they broke: TV remotes, VCRs, remote control cars, and more.

Where I learned even more was in working on actual cars. No longer was it just flathead or Phillips head screwdrivers. I began to learn about socket wrenches, various socket sizes, spark plug gaps, and oil filter wrenches. I learned the difference between a deep well socket and a spark plug socket (the latter has a rubber gasket inside). I helped as we changed alternators, fixed brakes, did tune-ups, and replaced fuel filters.

I learned the importance of buying the right wire harness when installing an aftermarket stereo, the role of power capacitors when installing an amplifier and subwoofers, and how to mount and hide a CD changer in a car. Once, while changing a thermostat, I was surprised to learn we didn't need to own every tool. AutoZone would loan them to you for free. We went there so often that they knew us as soon as we walked in.

My father had a special ingenuity when it came to solving problems. One day I asked, "Did you use to win your races, Dad?"

"What?! Boy. I had some bad stuff!"

We'd sit around smiling and laughing as he retold stories to me and my sister. He'd describe how my uncle lost control of his wagon and tumbled down the hill, how kids sped into curbs — or worse, into cars — at the bottom.

He may not have excelled at math and history in school, but my dad was far from dumb.

"I was the first kid to put brakes on his wagon."

"Nuh-uh!"

"Yeah, I did! Then your uncle stole my wagon and tore my shit up!" Again, we'd be near tears from laughing.

That same ingenuity helped him later in life. Pops began as a machine operator at the factory where I later learned what a flathead screwdriver was. He worked his way up the ladder, learning the machinery, solving problems, and even improving operations — like when he tweaked the plastic release valves on the injection molds to reduce excess output and waste.

He didn't learn that from a formal education. He used experience, observation, and creativity to become a key part of the operation. The language and skills he developed helped him succeed — and he passed much of it on to me.

Through watching, asking questions, and emulating what he did, I learned skills I've used throughout my life. In prison, I fix headphones, earbuds, Walkmans, radios, and other possessions. When I go home, I'll use this knowledge to help my family and my community.

Like my father, I didn't acquire this literacy in a classroom. I learned it through experience, diagnosing problems, implementing solutions, and speaking the language of the task at hand. It may not be textbook math, science, or history, but it's a form of knowledge that keeps cars running, factories producing, and people's everyday items working.

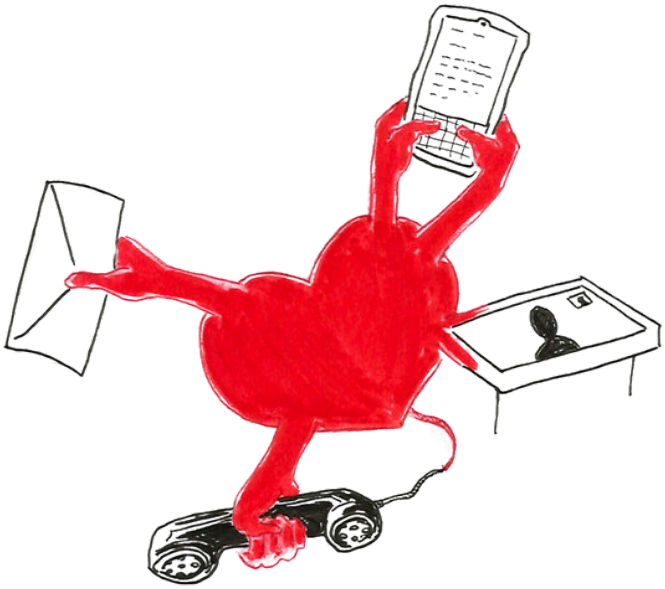
Though I'm capable, what I know only scratches the surface of my father's knowledge and ability, which is remarkable. I'm grateful for the wisdom he's passed down, and I hope to one day be as wise as he is. ▪

Fatherhood From Prison

Reflections and strategies on the power of showing up — even from behind bars.

By James Hale

Illustration by Jason Gorham



Over 1.7 million children in the United States have an incarcerated parent in prison, according to a study by The Marshall Project. For these children, the absence of a parent can deeply affect their emotional and developmental well-being.

As a father of four, I've faced the challenge of remaining present in my children's lives while being physically separated. Despite these difficulties, I've learned that fatherhood isn't about perfection — it's about showing up in meaningful ways, even from afar. Fatherhood is a responsibility that demands love, protection, and presence. While incarceration creates unique challenges, it doesn't have to mean being an absentee father. Like military fathers on deployment, incarcerated fathers can stay connected through visits, phone calls, and letters.

A father's presence — whether physical or emotional — is vital, especially during a child's formative years. Fathers provide balance to the family dynamic, teaching boys how to treat others with respect and showing girls how they deserve to be treated. By modeling kindness, affirming their children's worth, and offering stability, fathers play a crucial role in shaping their children's lives.

Even when physically distant, fathers can make a profound impact by staying present through meaningful, intentional efforts.

Being available for my children has taught me that fatherhood isn't about perfection — it's about being present in the ways that count. Even the small gestures and moments reinforce that my children are my top priority. Staying present, even from afar, has helped my children feel supported, valued, and loved.

As President Barack Obama once said, "Our children don't need us to be superheroes. They don't need us to be perfect. They do need us to be present. They need us to show up and give it our best shot, no matter what else is going on in our lives."

Fatherhood from prison may not look the same as it does outside, but it's still possible to show up for your children. By leaning on the tools available to you — your phone, your pen, your creativity, and your love — you can remain a powerful presence in their lives. For more practical ideas, refer to the following page. ▪

STRATEGIES FOR STAYING PRESENT

PHONE CALLS

A simple phone call can warm your child's heart and strengthen the parent-child bond. Aim to call your children at least once a week to let them know they're on your mind. Use these calls to ask about their day, discuss their school progress, and even help with their homework.

For example, I've often helped my kids with math and history assignments over the phone. If I didn't know the answers, I would take the time to research and find the information to help them. These moments show your children that you're invested in their success. Before ending the call, always remind them how much you love them. If you're upset with them, explain why — but never let the call end without expressing your love.

WRITING LETTERS

When phone calls aren't possible, letters offer another way to connect deeply with your children. Personalize your letters to make them meaningful. Share specific memories, express how much you love them, and let them know you can't wait to see them.

When my oldest son struggled with my absence, I wrote him a letter encouraging him to stay strong and be good. His reply floored me: "Be good, because good things happen to good people." This exchange reminded me how much a simple letter can mean.

You can also include drawings, cards, or photos with your letters. My kids love receiving pictures of me, and they treasure the small, thoughtful touches I add. These gestures show them that I'm still thinking of them, even from afar.

FAMILY TIME

For those fortunate enough to have contact or video visits, these moments offer unparalleled opportunities for connection. During visits, make your children feel like they're the center of your world. Notice small details about their appearance, their mood, or their growth, and show genuine care for their well-being.

When my kids visit, we take the time to study each other, talk, eat, and even play games like spades or Monopoly if they're available. We also take photos together to capture the memories. These visits remind my children that I'm still a part of their lives, despite the physical distance between us.

SUPPORT & GIFTS

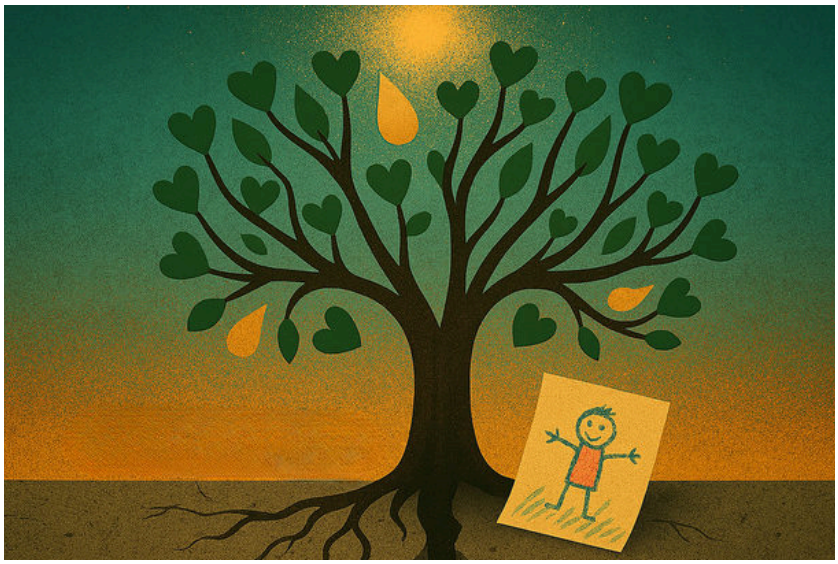
Supporting your children financially, even in small ways, can also make a big impact. I often save money from my prison job or from family contributions to send gifts to my kids. For example, during my daughter's Bratz doll phase, I saved up to buy her a Bratz-themed piggy bank. She was thrilled, not just because of the gift itself but because it came from me.

If financial contributions aren't possible, consider crafting items like purses, pillows, or portraits. These handmade gifts carry immense sentimental value and can serve as tangible reminders of your love.

Love and Sacrifice: The Key to Parenthood

My parents' love taught me the importance of sacrifice.

By Oliver Crawford



Parenthood is made up of sacrifices. Love and sacrifice go hand in hand.

My mother has shown that throughout my life, especially since my incarceration. I recall when I was first incarcerated, my mother — who already worked five days a week — added a shift to pay for phone calls and help me buy commissary. However, that was just the beginning. I only had enough money to pay for half of my attorney fees, so my mother took money from her annuity to pay the remainder.

It took me a long time to accept that her sacrifices were a gift of love. I was not happy that my mother felt she had to sacrifice so much for me, and I tried to hide my need, but the concealment only made the problem worse.

One day, in 2016, I was speaking to a friend who asked if I had funds for commissary. I told her "no."

The word got back to my mother. At 2:30 a.m., when she got in her car to drive to her shift at the U.S. Postal Service, she looked at her cellphone and saw a message from my friend saying I didn't have any money on my books. My mother worried all morning about me.

When I called the next day to see how she was doing, my mother spoke to me with anger and anxiety; I could hear the pain in her voice. As an adult, I had never heard her speak to me like this, so I listened closely.

She asked why I didn't let her know I didn't have any money on my books. I responded, "I never let you know when I don't have money unless you ask. You know I don't like bothering you or having you worry about me."

"Seeing a message at 2:30 a.m. that you're in need — that worries me," she said. "Don't ever do that again. When you were home, you made sure

> "You always want your children to know that despite absence and distance, you love them, will never abandon them, and will try your best to be available when they need you. And even though you are incarcerated, they *will* need you."

all your siblings were OK. It's time for us to make sure you are OK." I felt like a little boy again. My mother's love changed my heart and way of thinking because I never want her to worry.

Her actions taught me a lesson about being a father. Being a parent takes true sacrifice. You have to be willing to put your children first. Many of your plans have to be put on hold to attend to your children's needs. And if you are not able to provide for their needs, make them aware of your attempts and the barriers you face.

Many times, as parents, we want to make the biggest impact, and we overlook the power of small sacrifices. In the beginning years of my incarceration, money was scarce, as we were paying attorney fees, so I would save snacks from my lunch tray and mail them home in a manila envelope to my children. I'd write letters and send my favorite poem, "Hey Black Child." All these small sacrifices told them I love them.

Yet I wasn't able to make the most important sacrifice of all: sacrificing my desire to make them happy by telling them the truth. I would speak to my children on the telephone, and I can still hear those little voices saying, "Daddy, when are you coming home?" I would say, "I am coming home soon." This is where I failed, because they took my word as truth.

We must have ongoing conversations with our children, no matter their ages, explaining all the possibilities, including the possibility of being wrongfully convicted and incarcerated for a long period of time. A parent needs to sacrifice their own selfish desire to make their children happy in order to achieve long-term understanding. Otherwise, your actions can unintentionally lead your children to be bitter and mistrustful. This is one of the reasons I believe my son and I have an estranged relationship today.

You always want your children to know that despite absence and distance, you love them, will never abandon them, and will try your best to be available when they need you. And even though you are incarcerated, they *will* need you.

In 2017, I received a call to attend the counselor's office. The counselor and I would always joke with one another, but that day, when I walked into his office, he had a serious look on his face and said, "Young man, have a seat." After questioning me about the last time I spoke to my mother or sisters, he said that two women were killed the night before in the Washington Park area in Chicago. My heart started pounding and I was puzzled, wondering: Who are these ladies? He told me to hold on; he was calling my daughter.

As soon as she answered, she said, "Daddy, they killed my mother last night. I need you, Daddy." What do you say, what do you do? The only thing I could think of was what my mother showed and taught me: love and sacrifice. I told her how much I love her and that I am fighting to get home to her. She said, "Daddy, I feel alone," and I reminded her that I will always be there for her until I get home.

My parents have been great supporters of my children, and I make it my business to call my children on a regular basis just to actively listen. In true parent fashion, no matter how I am struggling emotionally, I have to sacrifice my feelings in order to elevate my children's well-being and quality of life.

Sacrifice goes hand in hand with love when it comes to our children. My parents continue to exemplify this behavior, and the fruit does not fall far from the tree. I will continue to sacrifice for my children, who are truly the apples of my eye. ▫

A Family's Unbreakable Bond

Family isn't about distance — it's about who shows up.

By Shawn Thigpen

The first time I met my niece Jaylona, she was 2 years old. I remember standing in the visitation room, my heart pounding, wondering if she would see me as a stranger.

But the moment she walked in, she locked eyes with me, yelled "Uncle Shawn," and ran straight into my arms — like she had known me her whole short little life. I held her close, breathing in the scent of baby lotion and love, knowing that no matter where I was, I would always be her uncle.

That moment was 20 years ago.

Today, Jaylona has children of her own, as do my other nieces and nephews. Though prison bars separate us, love knows no walls. Letters, phone calls, and visits keep us connected. They tell me about their struggles, their dreams, and their victories. I remind them to be strong, to choose the right path, to never let life's hardships define them.

They listen — not because I demand it, but because they know I care.

Some of my great-nieces and nephews I've never met in person. But they know me. They know my voice, my advice, and my love. Their parents tell them stories of their Uncle Shawn — the man who, despite his mistakes, never stopped being family.

And when I finally do meet them, I know, just like Jaylona all those years ago, they'll recognize me not as a stranger, but as someone who has always been there, loving them from afar.

Family isn't about proximity. It's about presence. Even in here, I remain present — always. ▫

Are We Our Mothers' Sons?

By Leon Fields

There's not a force more powerful than a mother's love, a gift they are given by the powers above.

A love travelling faster than the speed of sound, providing security when they're not around.

A love warm with comfort that keeps us alive, giving us meaning as we struggle and strive.

A love shining so bright from the furthest tower — we all need such light during our darkest hour.

We must harness her love and allow it to heal — but it takes conviction and courage to align with her will.

They are always our mothers, but are we always true sons? Only when that happens will the job be well done.

For My Alexandria

By Irene Romaniuk

Since the day that I first held you

My love for you spontaneously grew

You are my sun, when my clouds are grey and blue.

When I think of you, my heart aches because I miss you.

You are a special part of me,

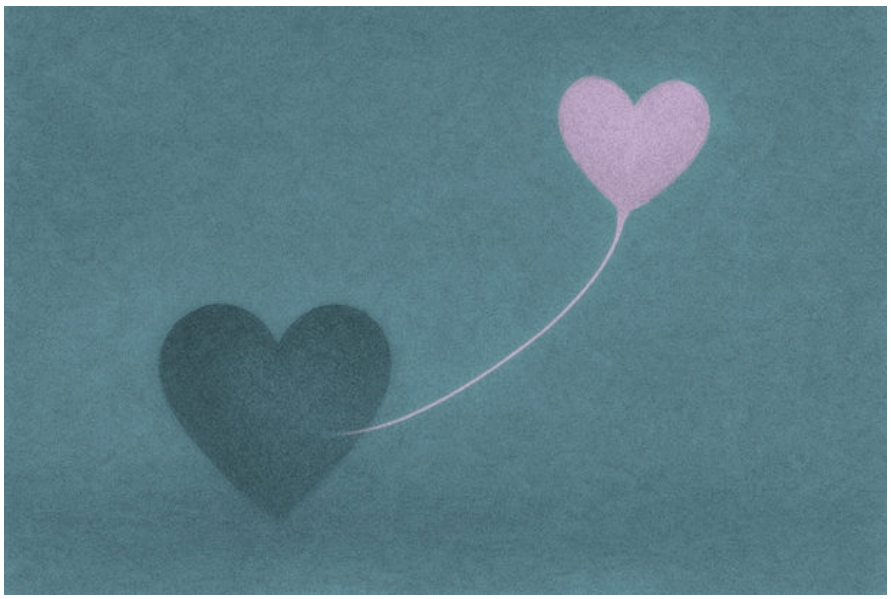
For without you, my life is truly incomplete.

So many rollercoasters, twists and turns—

Oh, how I miss you Alex, oh how I yearn.

Oh, how I miss you, no words can explain

You must know that you are truly loved.



My Dancing Butterfly

by Thomas J. Gordon

Illustration by Hugo Ocon

Like a caterpillar,
Pregnancy was your cocoon,
Transforming you into a
Beautiful Butterfly.

My Dancing Butterfly!
My
Monarch Mother.

Migrating millions of experiences,
Traveling the miles of
Being a
Parent.

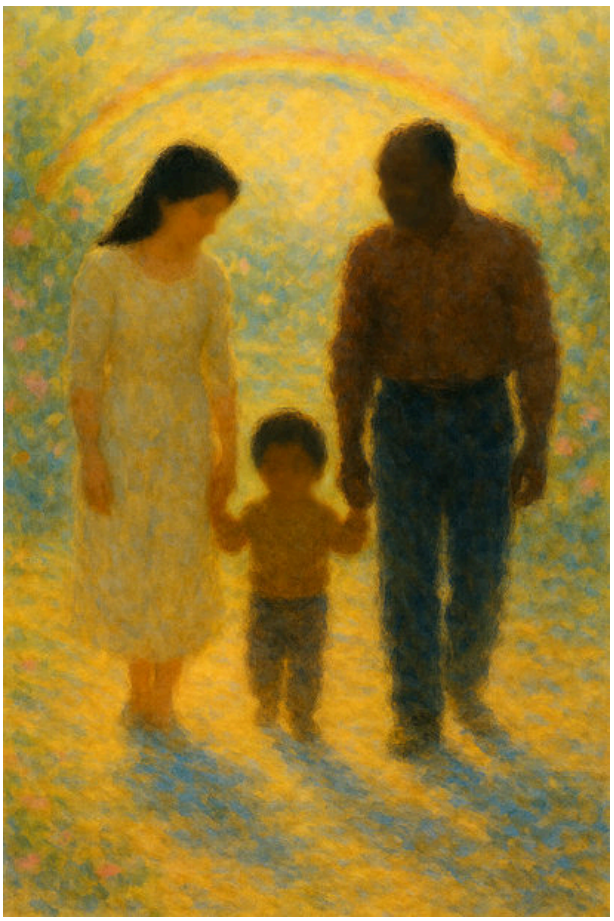
Of times immemorial,
The struggles of regret.
No thought
But of love —

Love of a lifetime!

Me From You

by Chelsea Raker

It's hard to understand how they can separate
Me from you,
But they do.
My blood is in your veins.
You drank of my milk,
Suckled from my breast.
I held your hands
As you took your first steps.
I gave you your father's name.
I am yours, you are mine.
You, your father, and I are a rainbow,
The ultimate neapolitan.
Our hearts make us the same.
We are family.



But to so many we are different.
I am constantly aware of the division.
It's not fair
How I can take up space.
It's not fair
How my voice is not erased.
It's not fair
That a land built off the backs of your ancestors
Has no safe place for you.
It's not fair
That I will never know how it feels
To walk in your shoes.

It's not fair,
So I'll always walk beside you.
I'm with you.
I'm behind you.
It's not fair,
So I promise to always acknowledge, be humble, and remain conscious.

I love you.

THE POWER OF CONNECTION

by Shawn Hardy-Hatchett

Illustration by Juan Garnica

Michael Broadway was a dear friend and companion. I was also his medical advocate and the publisher of his book One Foot In. *Our relationship blossomed from the tender ages of 15 and 16. From the moment we met, our bond was characterized by genuine respect and care. It was God's grace that brought us back into each other's lives once again, for which I am eternally grateful.*

Michael was a shining light in the lives of many, bringing warmth and positivity wherever he went. His infectious smile and unwavering kindness left an indelible mark on everyone he met. His spirit of resilience and courage, especially during his health battles, was truly inspiring and served as a beacon of hope to many.

Our friendship transcended the ordinary; it was a testament to the power of connection and the beauty of enduring relationships. Michael's impact on my life, both personally and professionally, is immeasurable. His passion for life, his insightful wisdom, and his unwavering faith were qualities that I admired deeply.

I will forever cherish the memories we created, the laughter we shared, and the profound conversations that enriched my life. Michael's legacy will continue to live on through his book and the countless lives he touched with his generous spirit and boundless love.

Rest in peace, dear Michael. Your light will forever shine in our hearts.

Yours truly, forever 16,
Shawn

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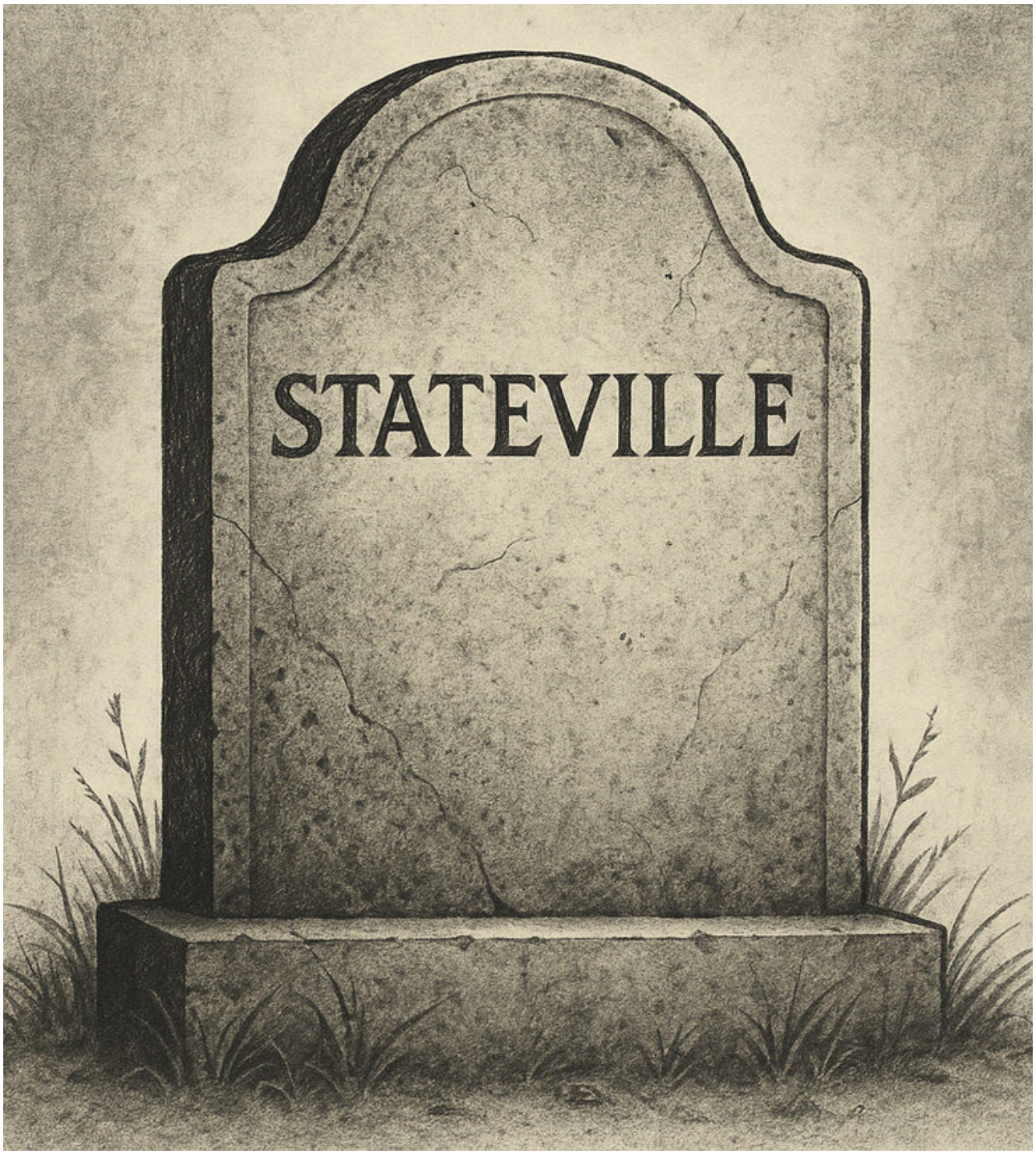
The Path of Suffering

An obituary to Stateville, the prison designed to break us.

By Anthony Ehlers



As a kid in the streets, I remember hearing about Stateville.

In the county jail, the stories—there were thousands of them, none of them good—were notorious. For many years, Stateville was one of the most violent, dangerous prisons in the country.

I got off Death Row at Menard in 2001. They didn't want me there, so they sent me to Stateville. Carved into the wall of my cell were the words, "Here Lies Via Crucis." Via Crucis, also known as the way of sorrow, is the path Jesus walked to his crucifixion. But when I saw it, I didn't think about religion. I thought about what it felt like to be in that place. To me, it was the path of suffering. And that's exactly what Stateville was.

In 1996, after the Richard Speck tapes became public — videos showing the serial killer, already serving a life sentence, doing drugs and having sex in prison — IDOC launched a statewide crackdown. Stateville had been running on its own terms for years.

Even by the time I arrived in 2001, it still wasn't under control. One of my first experiences there was watching a guy get stabbed in the chow hall. Nobody flinched. Coming from Menard, I expected a long lockdown. But they only locked the gallery for two days. Then we were back out. At Stateville, that kind of violence was just part of the week.

Eventually, the joint tightened up. But that brought a different kind of pressure. Guys couldn't handle being stuck in their cells. A lot of them turned to psych drugs. I had a friend named E who couldn't take it anymore. They gave him meds to knock him out, wake him up, and carry him in between. One day he stopped taking them. A week later, he hung himself.

Then there was my cellmate Angel. He was bipolar, like my mother. Some weeks, you couldn't stop him. Others, you couldn't get him out of bed. One day, he started giving away his things. A few days later, he jumped off 10 Gallery.

He found a door out, and he took it. I only hope he found his freedom.

Suicide wasn't uncommon, and you'd be shocked by who broke. Sometimes they didn't even see it coming themselves. The thing is, when you're suffering, you don't always know it. You just wake up and keep moving. The only way is forward. That's how most of us made it through — one step, one breath at a time. I can't tell you how many times I wanted to give up, but I refuse to give in. They want me to die, they sentenced me to die — I'll be damned if I give them that.

Typically, in prison, you don't share bad news or tell other people what's going on. Just as you can't help those out there, no one in here can help you either. I couldn't help Angel before he killed himself. I would have done all I could to help him if he shared with me what he was going through. I didn't see it because I was too busy trying to keep my own head above water, trying to make sure I didn't drown. All any of us in here are trying to do is to keep swimming.

Everyone has a breaking point. E reached his. Angel did too. A lot of guys did. The more time went on, the more it felt like Stateville was designed to push you there. It didn't just let you suffer — it made sure you did. And when it broke you, there was no help coming.

Mental health was something you had to manage on your own. You could go to psych to get drugs but not to get real help. Even now, there aren't enough people working to help the men who need it. Guys still suffer silently.

The same was true for physical health. If you got sick at Stateville, you either got better on your own or you died. It was that simple. They never "found" cancer until it was terminal. Even if they found it, you weren't assured of getting treatment in time. I know of several guys who were waiting to get treatment for cancer and died as a result of waiting. Everything there came too late, and it cost a lot of men their lives.

In 2010, Don Lippert, while incarcerated at Stateville Correctional Center, filed a lawsuit alleging inadequate medical care, specifically the denial of his prescribed insulin. This case expanded into a class-action lawsuit addressing systemic health care deficiencies within the Illinois Department of Corrections.

A consent decree was approved in January 2019 to reform prison health care, including appointing a court-approved monitor to oversee the implementation of these reforms. But a 2023 report by the monitor indicated that, four years after the decree's implementation, major deficiencies remained unaddressed, including a 50% vacancy rate for doctors and a 46% vacancy rate for overall health care positions.

When COVID hit in 2020, IDOC wasn't prepared, and to be fair, they shouldn't have been for such a calamity. But they made things worse. They turned F-house — a condemned, crumbling building — into a quarantine zone. Those who were COVID-positive worked in food service and around the facility. Some of them were still sent to work, infecting even more.

We stayed on lockdown for the better part of a year. No yard or gym, no visits with our loved ones, no class sessions for school or movement. Stuck in our cages while men around us died — including my best friend and cellmate, James Scott. I lost many friends to COVID.

Over 30 men died during this time; however, IDOC only admits to 13 actual deaths due to COVID.*

That was the toll in our immediate surroundings. Many guys had friends and family members die of COVID at home. Lynn Green lost numerous family members to COVID. There is no worse feeling than knowing your family is sick and needs you, and you can't do anything to help them. You don't get to say goodbye or comfort your family as they hurt. You can't go to the funeral or be there to bury those you love.

Some people say they're surprised we kept up with school through COVID. But school was the only normal thing I had. It kept me going. The quarter James died, I still got all As. The only way is forward, and the only way to get there is one step at a time.

When lockdowns ended, it didn't make the rest of the issues at Stateville better. The state, and the federal courts, knew about the conditions we lived in: the crumbling structures, the bird shit, the mold, the lack of ventilation — all of it. And they did nothing.

The water at Stateville was found to be contaminated with high levels of lead and copper, exceeding federal safety standards. Additionally, in 2022, Legionella bacteria were detected in the prison's water system, leading to water shutoffs and the distribution of bottled water. The neglect was palpable.

"Imagine you had an animal shelter," I wrote for the *Chicago Reader*. "It was full of dogs and cats. They were packed into a building that was crumbling down around them. It was dirty and moldy. It was hot with no ventilation. The animals only got dirty, poisoned water to drink, and they never got out of their cages for walks or to see the sun. You would have riots in the streets. There would be angry protestors with signs. There would be media and news helicopters. It wouldn't be tolerated. Yet, we do this very same thing to men, and no one bats an eyelash. Every day we knew that our lives were worth less than a dog's."

Every grievance, every death, every day without help might've gone unnoticed — until our brother Michael Broadway died. The conditions of Stateville killed him.

He told our brother Bob and me that if he had to be up at 9 Gallery, he would be glad he was by us because he knew we wouldn't let anything happen to him. That still haunts me. I stood watching in a mirror as he took his last breaths. No one was there to help him. I was just a few feet from him, and I couldn't get to him.

Mike died of neglect and incompetence. He died in a way I'd seen countless other men die in Stateville — of neglect. The difference was that Mike had a lot of people who loved him and cared about him, people who would shine a light on what happened.

The light was so bright it finally shut Stateville down.

I got *Via Crucis*, the path of suffering, tattooed on my chest because that is what Stateville represents. Men suffered there — Mike, James, friends of mine. Many in silence, and many who didn't make it out alive.

It's closed now, but its damage lives on. ▫

**I know that 30 men died during this period at Stateville because I and others kept track and recorded all their names. We lived through this experience. The Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority's "Death in Custody Reports" also document dozens of deaths listed as "natural causes" at Stateville during this time — a vague misnomer, since many of those deaths were, in reality, caused by COVID-19. The Illinois Department of Corrections, in "COVID-19 Deaths Reported within IDOC from March 2020-2021" from the John Howard Association, reported only 13 COVID-19 deaths at Stateville, and it took legislative pressure to force the agency to release even that data. IDOC has never been forthcoming about the true scale of those deaths.*

At Odds With Transfers

Story by Fly Miller ¦ *Illustration by Ariel Bueno*

A commentary on the move from Stateville Correctional Center last year.

1 The Announcement

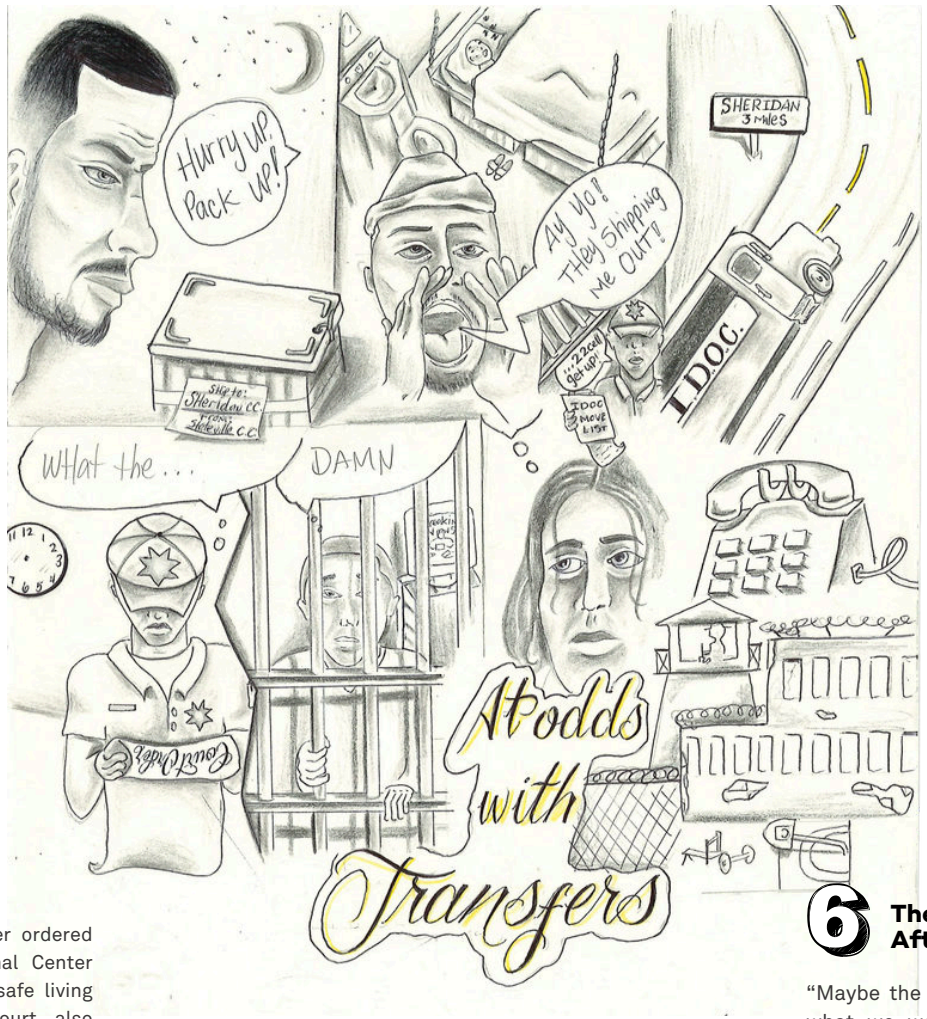
Boxes were being filled and tape-sealed as individuals in custody at Stateville Correctional Center prepared to transfer out of Stateville for the last time. Sad faces of long timers because, for them, this was their home for the last two to three decades. They had gotten used to the environment: lax security and being close to the city of Chicago where most of the Stateville individuals in custody came from.

2 The Goodbyes

Every Tuesday and Thursday morning around 5 a.m. in late August 2024, transferring individuals in custody would be yelling their farewells to their remaining friends whom they have known, and grown to love, over the last few decades of living behind the walls of Stateville. These were really heartfelt goodbyes. Some of these goodbyes woke others out of their sleep. As the weeks went on, the cell houses became quieter. A population of nearly 500 individuals began to dwindle.

3 The Transfer

Some individuals in custody, such as NPEP and North Park students, knew where they would be going — but for most, there was anxiety and no information. Many were transferred to worse prisons downstate, such as Menard, Pinckneyville, and Lawrence Correctional Centers. These prisons are not only farther from families — hundreds of miles and hours of driving away — but also more dangerous.



4 The Anxiety

In 2024, Gov. J.B. Pritzker ordered that Stateville Correctional Center be closed because of unsafe living conditions. A federal court also ordered transfers: all individuals in custody (except those in the health care unit) had to be moved by September 30, 2024. This created anxiety.

Once prisoners were transferred, they would return to two-man cell living quarters — the size of your average bathroom. Some individuals, like Darrell Fair, favored single-man cells and thought individuals in custody should band together to keep Stateville open.

5 The Discontent

Some families, like Joseph Eastling's, wrote and called to request transfers closer to home — but with no success. Joseph was sent to Pinckneyville; within a week, they were on lockdown. I talked to staff who had no idea where they would be transferred. Officers came to me wondering where they would be going. I had no clue.

6 The Aftermath

"Maybe the move saved lives." That's what we were told. A federal judge ordered the closure after inspectors found Stateville unsafe: crumbling buildings, contaminated water. Officially, we were now in a better place.

But not everyone felt that way. Transfers tore people from their programs, from families trying to visit, from the stability they'd built. For many, leaving Stateville meant heading farther from home and deeper into unknown dangers.

What My Mornings Are Like in Prison

I wake up hoping to be on a king-sized mattress with a view of Lake Michigan. Instead, my bed is paper thin and I see 96 rusted steel bars.

By Tony Triplett

This story was originally published by Prison Journalism Project.

It's 3 a.m. I'm awakened by the smell of human feces and the sound of a flushing toilet from my neighbor next door.

I open my eyes, hoping to feel the comfort of a king-sized mattress, pearly white walls, a view of Lake Michigan outside of my window, and the smell of breakfast being cooked. But my reality is a small prison cell, a paper-thin mattress, walls with chipping gray paint, and 96 rusted steel bars.

Sprawled on the bottom bunk, I take in my surroundings. I'm 18 years into an endless debt of two natural life sentences owed to the state of Illinois. This is my dwelling space, a human cage.

The flushing toilet finally stops, which allows me to breathe through my nose again. I cherish the brief silence while I struggle to keep water out of my eyes. Blessed with the luxury of not having a cellmate, I'm able to cry in private, which is part of my daily routine. With a tear-stained face, I begin my day.

Holding a toothbrush the size of my pinky finger, I hit the cold-water button on my stainless-steel sink. I wait for the running brown water to turn clear, but it never does. Frustrated, I grab a bottle of water and attend to my daily hygiene.

Two bottles later, I'm preparing to clean the floor and walls in my cell. I grab a bottle of cleaning solution that consists of Irish Spring soap, bleach, and Axe body wash. The solution provides a nice smell to my living space.

I pull out my property box and place it on the top bunk. Next I pull two laundry bags off the floor and also place them on the top bunk. One bag is filled with clothes, specifically my whites, which are socks, underwear, and T-shirts. The other bag is filled with food, including packaged tuna, cereal, grits, chips, cookies, and coffee.

Once the floor is clear, I get on my hands and knees and wipe the floor with the cleaning solution. The liquid is so potent that roaches scurry up the wall. I try to smash them with a rolled-up magazine before I finish cleaning the floor.

Exhausted and famished, I examine the contents of my recently delivered breakfast tray, which holds a slice of coffee cake, cereal, two boiled eggs,

“As I struggle to catch my breath, I realize I have a dilemma on my hands. Stacked in a corner are cases of bottled water. My shower days are every other day and today isn’t one of them. So, I have to decide if I should use a third of my water to clean myself or wash up with the iced tea-colored water that comes out of my sink.”

and an apple juice box. I decide to work out first.

I start with jumping jacks, then pushups, situps, and running in place. The plan is to go for 30 minutes, but I’m determined to lose weight, so I go for an hour. Dripping in sweat, I stare at a roach as it scurries up the wall and out of my cell.

As I struggle to catch my breath, I realize I have a dilemma on my hands. Stacked in a corner are cases of bottled water. My shower days are every other day and today isn’t one of them. So, I have to decide if I should use a third of my water to clean myself or wash up with the iced tea-colored water that comes out of my sink. Remembering that I can buy goods from the commissary store tomorrow, the decision is a no-brainer. Eight bottles later, I’m back on my bunk, allowing my muscles to heal. Without eating breakfast, I fall asleep.

Hours later, I’m awakened to the sound of the band Coldplay and my two neighbors arguing, which is a form of entertainment for me. Since my upstairs neighbor is playing Coldplay, I know the time. Prison is all about routines and his routine is to play Coldplay at 9 a.m.

With school in an hour, I gather my clothes for the day. Beneath my mattress is a pair of navy-blue khakis and a sky-blue button-up shirt. Once I’m dressed, I put on my all-white Nike Uptown sneakers and finally reach for my breakfast tray.

I grab the tray, anticipating a subpar meal, but it’s even worse: I open up the tray and find three roaches feasting on my coffee cake. I throw the food in the toilet. I reach under my bunk and pull out my makeshift cooler, which I made from Styrofoam trays.

I grab a carton of milk and a bag of cereal, which I eat while listening to my neighbors lie to one another. I’m reminded of a Richard Pryor joke that went something like this: “He’d tell a lie, I’d tell a lie; that’s how we became friends!” Today’s lie is about how much drugs they had sold and their trips back and forth to Mexico.

They are on opposite sides of me, so I have the unfortunate pleasure of being stuck in the middle. The toilet flusher who typically wakes me up starts the fight.

“My dude,” he says. “I used to make two trips to Mexico every week.”

My neighbor, the skeptic, replies: “Man, you’ve never been to Mexico. What part of Mexico were you going to?”

“The Mexican part.”

All I can do is laugh. The two keep lying to each other for about 40 minutes before the officer arrives at my door for school at 10 a.m. I place my bowl in the sink and leave my cell. ▫

In My Illinois Prison, a Trail of Bloody Footprints

One day in the life of an incarcerated biohazard worker.

By Lynn Green

This story was originally published by Prison Journalism Project.

In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, I was hired as a full-time health care biohazard worker. My charge was to clean up biohazard contamination. In most instances, I only had to decontaminate a small area of blood, fecal matter, or sometimes both.

This began to change as the year came to a close. I was being called in for decontamination more frequently, and to the same location. As it turns out, there was a young man who had been cutting himself over and over again.

I can't remember the exact day, but the hour never escapes my memory. It was 10:35 p.m.; I had been asleep for close to 40 minutes after working a 15-hour shift, when an officer roused me from my sleep. I was needed in the health care unit.

It took a few minutes to orient myself, but soon I was back in the HCU. The sergeant for the graveyard shift was briefing me. He was an ex-military man with a stout build. He was bald, clean-shaven, and hypermasculine, but today his dark brown complexion appeared pallid, his eyes weary.

Speaking softly, he placed a gallon of bleach, a roll of large bags, and a box of extra-large surgical gloves on the counter. "Make it work," he said.

As I turned to leave, he sank into his chair and thanked me for coming. His behavior seemed a little odd for a routine cleanup. I understood why as soon as I opened the door to the infirmary. Immediately I detected a thick scent of blood — that metallic, pungent essence. It stopped me in my tracks.

I stepped inside the brightly illuminated infirmary and closed my eyes, before pressing on with my cleaning supplies.

About 10 feet from the infirmary door was a chain of bloody shoe prints. My heart thundered in my ears as I followed the trail down the hall to a cell door, which was partially open.

> “It was like something out of a horror movie. Blood was splattered on the walls and the conjoined stainless-steel toilet and sink. There was nowhere to step without touching blood. I froze, staring at that pool of maroon.”

I peered inside. It was like something out of a horror movie. Blood was splattered on the walls and the conjoined stainless-steel toilet and sink. There was nowhere to step without touching blood. I froze, staring at that pool of maroon.

Small patches of gauze lay across the stagnant fluid, wadded into dark red balls. They looked stuck in a trail of motion, as if someone had hastily tried to wipe up the fluid then abruptly stopped. The coagulated masses reminded me of charred meat.

Suddenly, a small hand gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze. It was a nurse. He said something to me, but my mind was still far away. Noticing my distant look, he repeated himself in a whisper:

“He still had a pulse when we rushed him out of here, but he’ll need a transfusion to survive this one. I think he’ll be OK.”

“By the way,” he continued, “sorry about the gauze and the footprints in the hall. I know that it makes your job much harder, but we were in a panic.”

He turned and walked a few steps toward the nurse’s station when I remembered something I needed.

“Do you have a bio—”

“Biohazard suit?” he said abruptly, finishing my question. “I’m sorry, but no.”

(When I first began the job, there were several such suits available within the nurse’s stations throughout the health care unit.)

“What about some Scotch tape and maybe a little help covering my body in these large plastic bags?”

He answered yes before disappearing into the nurse’s station. He returned to the hall moments later with an arm filled with different types of tape. He hurried over to me, dropping several rolls of tape, and asked, “Now what?”

I looked at him as I detached several large bags from the roll of bags that I brought with me. I stuck one leg into a large bag and pulled it taut.

The nurse proceeded to help me wrap my body in plastic. He closed all the openings with tape. When we were done, the only parts of me left exposed were my hands and head. The nurse produced a white and red N95 mask that was still sealed in plastic. He then showed me how to put the mask on properly, as well as how to take it off. Then he was gone. I put on five pairs of surgical gloves, opened some large bags, and went to work.

Four hours later, I was drenched in sweat, exhausted to the core. The room and the hall were sanitized, and I was given the rest of the day off. I was later told that the young man lived; he had reportedly been placed in a new cell so that he could be watched continuously for his own safety.

One day the young man overheard a few of us talking about the Chicago Bears, and he promptly jumped right in. The acoustics and design of the health care unit — shaped like a big donut with the nurse’s station in the middle, surrounded by cells — made it so at first I couldn’t see where the voice was coming from. But we could hear each other. He shared that he was the young man who had unsuccessfully tried to take his own life by cutting himself a week or two earlier.

Immediately, my mind went back to that cell, the blood, the smell, the foreboding that penetrated the air.

Then I spotted him across the donut, his face peering out the cell door. There was an officer seated in a chair in front, which indicated the person in the cell was on continuous watch for his safety. I lightly engaged him and his face lit up with excitement. He was pretty knowledgeable about football, so our conversation went on for hours, with my leaving periodically to complete a work-related task, then returning.

The officer assigned to continuously watch the young man was shocked but also thrilled. As long as the young man was happy talking, the officer wouldn’t have to worry about him trying to hurt himself. ▫

Beyond the Walls

Students like Sela Breen are using journalism to challenge stigma, elevate voices, and reimagine justice.

By Donnell Green

When Northwestern senior Sela Breen was making a two-hour drive every week from her Evanston apartment to Sheridan Correctional Center, she wasn't visiting family — she was attending a college class as part of NPEP.

That class, a journalism and documentary storytelling course, brought together Northwestern University journalism undergraduates and incarcerated undergraduates from Sheridan Correctional Center to collaborate on short films. The journalism students partnered with their incarcerated classmates to help the Sheridan students tell stories that extended beyond their sentence.

Breen's introduction to the carceral system began a few years ago in 2021, when she left her hometown of Larchmont, New York, to begin her studies at Northwestern.

She was always interested in NPEP but never had time in her schedule to visit the correctional center, so she jumped at the chance to write about NPEP for *North by Northwestern*. While writing the story, she attended an NPEP community hour, where friends and supporters of the program gathered for monthly conversations and reflection. She noted that it was "easy" to care about what happens behind prison gates and that she knew there was a story to be told.

"People are human and should be treated as such," she said. "You can try to ignore it, but being aware is a beneficial way to expand your worldview. There are people who can't advocate for themselves, and the fact that no one really knows what's going on behind prison walls is a sign that it's not good."

That compassion deepened during the journalism class, where her final project was to create a documentary about carceral injustice through the experiences of two NPEP students: Tevin Louis and myself. Filming that documentary — titled *"It Starts With Us"* — took her across Chicagoland to interview family members of her incarcerated classmates at Sheridan.

Weekly class focus groups helped Sela and her partner, Sandra Salib, plan how best to expose injustices in the system. After quick text exchanges with Sheridan students' family members, they'd show up at homes with their gear and start recording. She visited Tevin Louis's and my family members on the outside, gathering interviews and insight to help build a fuller narrative, one that pushed back against the stigma so often attached to incarceration.

"You see how much it has impacted [a family's] life," Breen said. "Some are not able to visit. It's not like someone is shipped off to prison and you don't have to worry about them. To have your child, sibling, or friend there and still be burdened with all the extra stuff is so unfair."

The more she reported, the more invested she became. And the more injustice she encountered.

"The justice system is flawed, which I already knew — but now I know more," she said. "I'm shocked hearing about wrongful convictions or people in prison for things they didn't even do."

In March, several of the films produced in the course that Breen was a part of were selected to screen at the AMDOC Film Festival, one of the nation's most prominent showcases for documentary work.

Since becoming involved with NPEP, Breen has encouraged friends to take classes inside whenever the opportunity arises.

"This is my favorite thing I've done at Northwestern," she said. "I told my friends on campus that whenever they see an NPEP course, they have to sign up. I've even encouraged my mom to get involved with prison volunteer work in New York — I know she'd love it."

Even after the course was finished, Breen continued making the weekly trip to Sheridan to help with the *Northwestern Insider*. The drive, she admits, "worried" her parents, but she's committed to using her storytelling skills to uplift the voices of those inside.

"As I look over my life so far, I think it's really exciting to see how I translated my love for theatrical storytelling into a career in journalism, which is storytelling in its own right," she said.

Although the stage looks different — its characters less romanticized, its costumes a reluctant shade of blue — her instinct to listen and document has stayed the same.

This time, she understands: the action continues long after the curtain is closed. ▫

Reflections from Inside

By Sela Breen, Northwestern Class of '25

Breen sits down with Tevin Louis as he shares the impact he's had on his siblings.

Green looks out the window, replaying a conversation he had about being vulnerable.

Green's father, Lary, opens up about raising a family while battling external forces.

I was intrigued by NPEP when I started at Northwestern, and admired the program even more after writing a story about it for North by Northwestern*. However, I could not begin to understand what the program truly meant until I finally visited Sheridan for the first time as part of Professor Brent Huffman's Documenting Carceral Injustice class.*

Our first visit to Sheridan was in the fall. I was a bit apprehensive, as I expect many would be when entering a prison for the first time, but any bit of fear was quickly washed away as soon as I entered the classroom. I was immediately in awe of the kindness, passion, and intellect fostered behind those walls.

My group consisted of me, Sandra Salib, Donnell Green, Demetrius Cunningham, Dedric "Champ" Moore, and Tevin Louis. We quickly connected and began to discuss ideas for our documentary. They were plentiful. I was amazed by how these men, who had been stripped of so much, were so full of life and so ready to unpack their stories. And let's be clear, we did not get to every story in our class. The lived experience of each of these men could fill their own documentary.

As the process continued, I began to look forward to my time at Sheridan each week, just because I wanted to hang out with my new classmates. When I talked about the course with my friends and family, I explained how these were the most lively class discussions I had in years, or maybe ever. The perspective these men had was something I had never experienced in my education, and I knew I needed to soak up as much of it as possible. So, even when the class finished after the fall quarter, I had to continue going to Sheridan.

My perspective on the carceral system is forever changed after seeing the incredible people being kept in prison, some for crimes they did not commit, and I will carry that with me throughout my life and career. And the connections I made, the stories I was trusted with, and the conversations shared will always be with me. ▫

A Well of Hope

A World Apart

Honoring Michael Broadway's legacy through a well that brings clean water — and renewed life — to Mailao, Chad.

by Leon Fields & Brandon V. Wyatt

Juneteenth is a day of profound significance. But for many of us who were housed at Stateville Correctional Center before its closure, the day carries an additional emotional weight. On June 19, 2024, we lost one of our finest — Northwestern alumnus Michael Broadway.

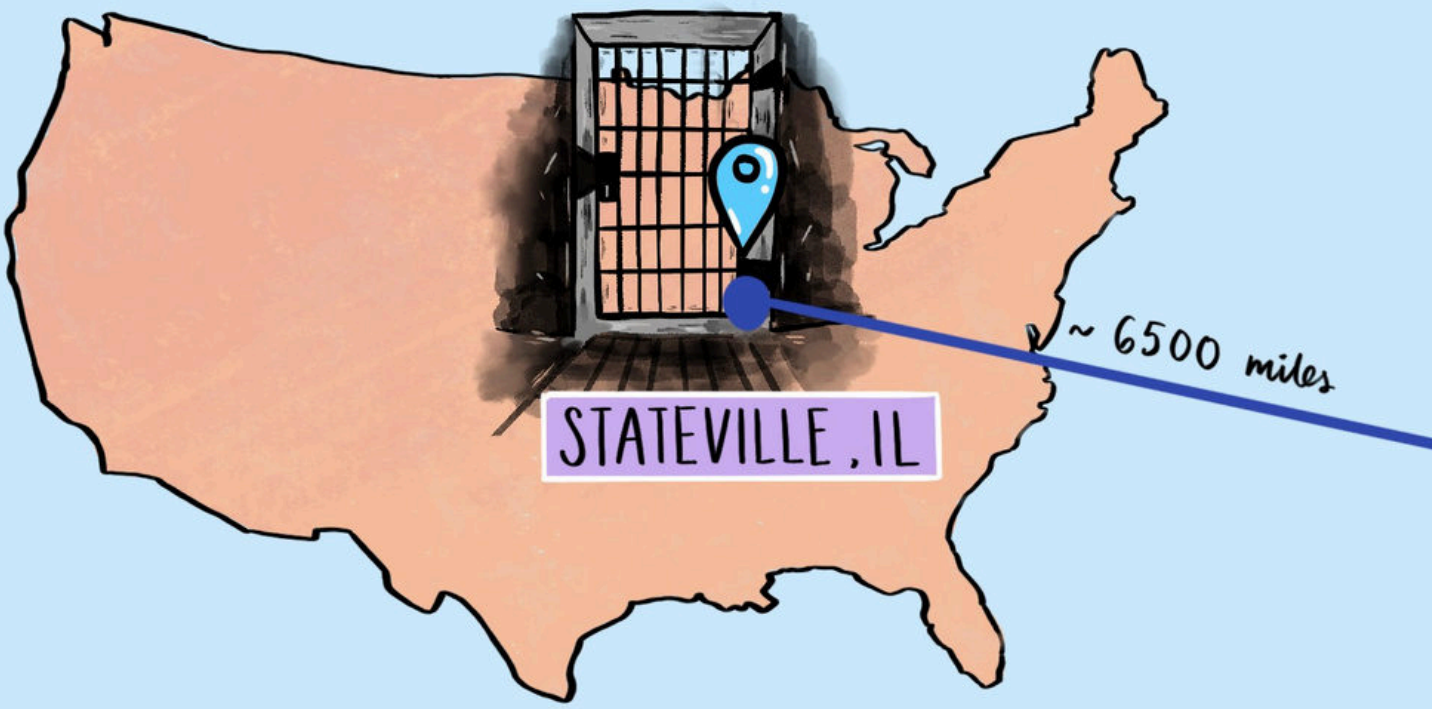
For two weeks after his passing, Michael's cell remained illuminated, his belongings undisturbed. Among them stood seven cases of bottled water — an image seared into our memory. Those cases spoke volumes: they reflected the anxiety and uncertainty we all felt during Stateville's ongoing water crisis, where clean water was never guaranteed and often rationed in fear.

In Michael's honor, we — students of NPEP Cohort 2 — joined together with Yolanda Fields, one of NPEP's beloved mothers, to raise funds to build a well in the village of Mailao, Chad. Now, hundreds of families have access to safe, reliable water for drinking, cooking, cleaning, and growing food. And with every drop, Michael's legacy lives on.

Each of these remarkable individuals brings unique talents, gifts, and abilities to the world. But when thirst takes hold, nothing else can flow out. As this village celebrates the fountain of hope and the end of thirst, much is being restored — opening the door to a world of possibility.

Michael Broadway, our beloved brother, was the inspiration for this well. He lived his life discovering, creating, and caring. He believed in the power of people to transcend circumstance, and he treated everyone as capable and worthy.

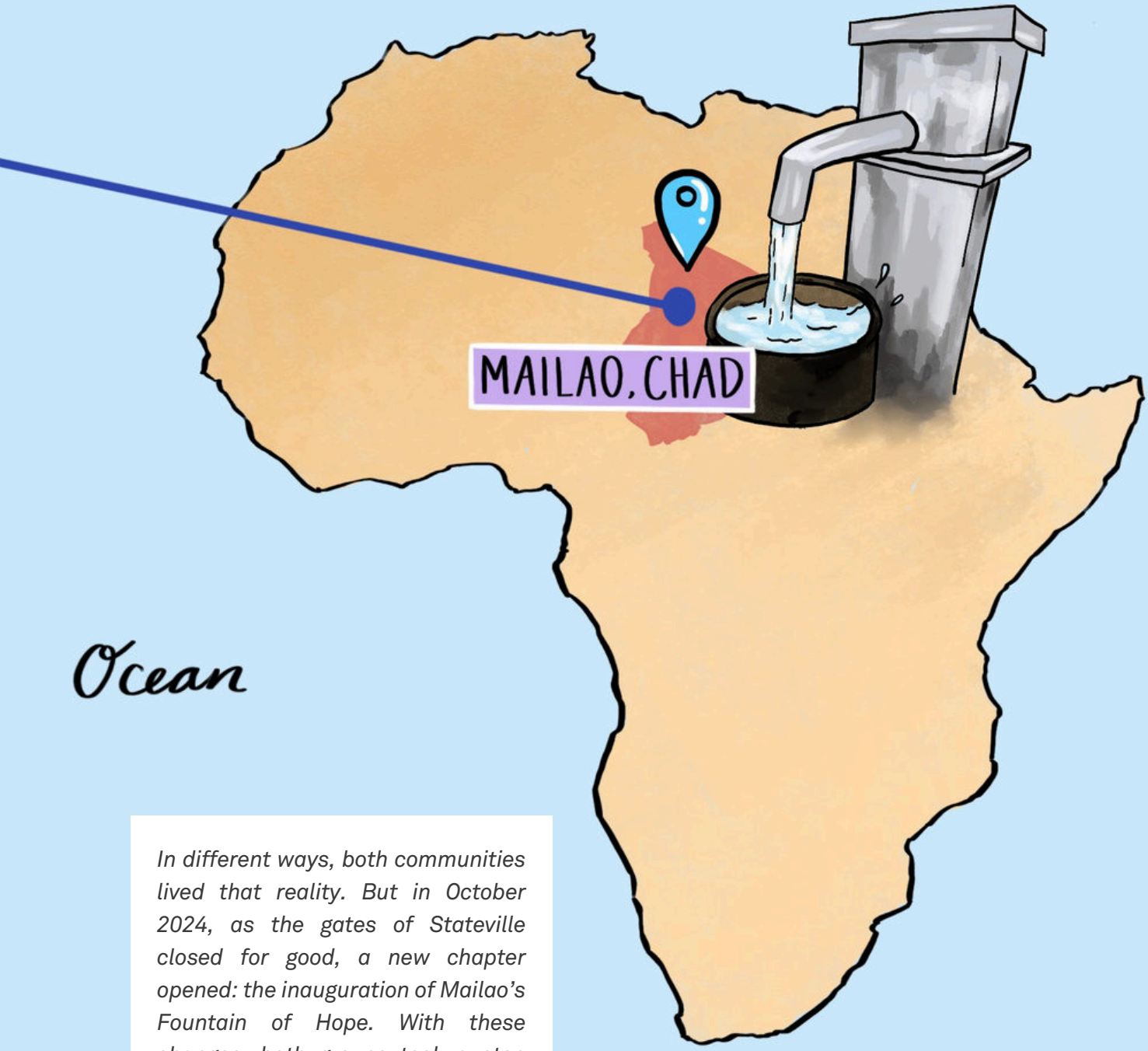
In doing so, he transformed every space he entered — and so shall we follow his lead. To praise him is to carry forward his light, and to make the world better in his name.



Roughly 6,500 miles apart and separated by the world's second-largest ocean, what could possibly link the incarcerated men in NPEP to the citizens of Mailao, Chad?

Atlantic

According to the World Health Organization, one-third of the global population still struggles to access adequate amounts of safe drinking water.



In different ways, both communities lived that reality. But in October 2024, as the gates of Stateville closed for good, a new chapter opened: the inauguration of Mailao's Fountain of Hope. With these changes, both groups took a step out of that one-third — and into something better.

Illustration by Joyce Wang

The men constructing this well demonstrate remarkable commitment, embodying an African principle: the land provides for our material needs, but the right to it is earned through labor. The beginning of any endeavor is the hardest, yet their strength and resilience fuel their progress. And while they extract this precious, finite resource — water — one truth remains: people are the greatest asset of all.

While the new well brings relief to the village of Mailao, there is still much work to be done. According to UNICEF, in 8 out of 10 households without on-site water access, it's women and girls who are responsible for collecting water. Worldwide, women spend an estimated 200 million hours every day walking long distances to gather it.

Imagine a world where those hours are given back — to pursue an education, grow food, earn income, or simply care for themselves. Then ask: What can we do to help turn that vision into their reality?

"Happiness requires something to do, something to love and something to hope for."
— Swahili

The radiant joy on this mother's face is shared by many across Chad. She understands the power of this moment, one that will allow her to provide a better life for her children, and for the sons and daughters of Mailao. With improved access to water, the village gains more than just a material resource — the water nurtures mental, social, and even spiritual well-being.

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Why Were We Left Behind?

A preface to "The Youth Left Behind."

By Lynn Green

That was the question that bounced around in my head for a few days after reading "The Youth Left Behind," by Elbonie Burnside and Margaret DeFrancisco. I scoured through the masterfully crafted piece until my eyes burned, then I scoured some more; falling asleep with their words echoing through my mind:

"Once again, a pathway toward redemption has been blocked — not by our actions, but by a system still unwilling to account for growth, change, and humanity."

But what was I looking for exactly? I am one of the youth left behind, yet the seemingly rhetorical question stands: Why are the youth being left behind? Is it really because we have a system that is unwilling to account for growth, change, and humanity? Illinois is a state run by Democrats who believe in the values of growth, change, and humanity — right?

The Democrats have a supermajority trifecta (a majority in the House, Senate, and a Democrat as the governor), so it should be a cinch to pass legislation that is supported by years of empirical data, saves taxpayer dollars, and makes communities safer.

Yet, criminal legal bills that have all of the aforementioned elements continue to fail — even when they involve the youth — if the bill is retroactive (applying to all). My mind has been truly boggled by this continuous denial.

I think of Sen. Robert Peters and his bill SB2256, which would have created a process for people to petition the courts to reevaluate their sentences after serving ten years. And HB1241, a bill introduced by Rep. Maurice West, that would grant judges the authority to decide appropriate sentences for people younger than 21 on a case-by-case basis, instead of the mandatory minimums.

The list goes on and on — and they ALL FAILED!

Meanwhile, the incarcerated youth in Illinois, the late adolescent carveouts — even the small number of those who were under 21 when their crime was committed — age out of crime.

Most work and educate themselves wherever the opportunity is given to them. All of them grow old due to the harsh long sentences they were given, which no longer serve the interest of justice. The great Angela Davis, in the article "The Meaning of Freedom," gives us some true insight into the failed legislation attempts. She asserts:

"The prison industrial complex has become so big and powerful that it works to perpetuate itself. It's literally self-perpetuating. The raw materials are immigrant youth and youth of color ... This is something that the United States has basically offered to the world: a way of managing social problems by refusing to confront them. Instead of solving issues, the system puts people behind bars."

When all is said, the system continues to perpetuate itself, and marginalized communities of color are the ones that suffer the most. Our governments spend more and more to house people in prison. They spend more and more to hire, train, and equip police officers, and less and less on education and community investment — thus perpetuating the prison industrial complex and keeping poor communities poor.

So please, read the article "The Youth Left Behind" and get active. Share the story. Write to your legislators. Email them. Call them. Communicate with them on social media. Use one or all of these forms of communication and let them know your needs.

Let them know that you support pathways to redemption, not just deterrence and retribution. Ask them to pass legislation that acknowledges — in the words of Burnside and DeFrancisco — "growth, change, and humanity ... because real lives hang in the balance." ▪

The Youth Left Behind

Illinois' Youthful Parole Law offers second chances — unless you were convicted before 2019.

By Elbonie Burnside & Margaret DeFrancisco

A growing body of scientific research indicates that adolescents, up to the age of 24, exhibit distinct developmental differences from adults. Previously, the courts exercised limitless discretion when sentencing youthful offenders convicted of violent crimes.

In an effort to correct this injustice, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled in 2019 that a juvenile convicted of first-degree murder can claim a constitutional violation under the Eighth Amendment if they can demonstrate two elements:

- The original trial court at sentencing did not consider the mitigating factors of youth.
- The court imposed a sentence of more than 40 years upon the defendant, which the Illinois Supreme Court has determined constitutes a de facto life imprisonment sentence.

People v. Buffer set a new precedent. However, those of us who don't have sentences that exceed 40 years don't meet the standard.

In 2021, the state of Illinois continued to be progressive by reinstating the possibility of parole for this vulnerable population through the Illinois Youthful Parole Law — originally established by HB531 in 2019 and effective as of June 1 that year. Before this law, parole for all convicted individuals had been abolished in 1978; now, individuals who committed crimes before the age of 21 can petition the Illinois Prison Review Board for early release.

Those not serving natural life, or sentences for first-degree murder or aggravated criminal sexual assault of a child, become eligible for parole review after 10 years of confinement. Individuals serving a sentence for first-degree murder become eligible after 20 years.

The new law appeared promising. Its very essence circulated a renewed sense of hope among people who had committed crimes in their youth. But that feeling quickly faded for those of us sentenced before June 1, 2019. We were told that this opportunity would not apply to us.

This monumental bill, which seemed like a step in the right direction, came with a carve-out: Youthful offenders convicted before 2019 were not eligible. The law is not retroactive. Once again, lawmakers seemed to have forgotten us.

Restore Justice reports that in Illinois there are 523 youthful offenders currently incarcerated who would have instantly become eligible for parole consideration if the law had been retroactive. This wouldn't have been a mass release; the Illinois Department of Corrections incarcerates over 25,000 people.

And, according to Injustice Watch, "more than 167 juvenile offenders set to serve more than 50 years as Illinois prisoners ... will not be eligible under the new bill."

Why weren't we included?

For decades, many of us have matured behind bars — behind layers of barbed wire fences — and transformed our lives for the better. We made a conscious decision to grow. We've aged out of crime. We've become scholars. We've mastered trades. We've developed artistic talents. We've done all of this despite our circumstances. Despite having no incentives. Despite being skipped over for programming because of long sentences with distant out-dates. Despite knowing we may never get the chance to use any of these skills as free people.

"Once again, a pathway toward redemption has been blocked — not by our actions, but by a system still unwilling to account for growth, change, and humanity."

In February 2023, Sen. Seth Lewis introduced SB 2073, which would have made parole opportunities retroactive. A month later, it was shelved.

It seems lawmakers are still hesitant to offer a second chance to those of us who never had a first. To the broader public, we have become collateral damage — the forgotten byproduct of a failed and flawed system.

On Feb. 7, 2025, there was new momentum to correct this carve-out. State Rep. Theresa Mah sponsored HB 3332, a bill that would make the Youthful Parole Law retroactive.

But on April 10, that momentum was abruptly halted. HB3332 was brought to the House floor for a final vote and failed, 49–51. Despite gaining dozens of co-sponsors and passing through committee, the bill fell just short. A motion to reconsider the vote was filed but later withdrawn.

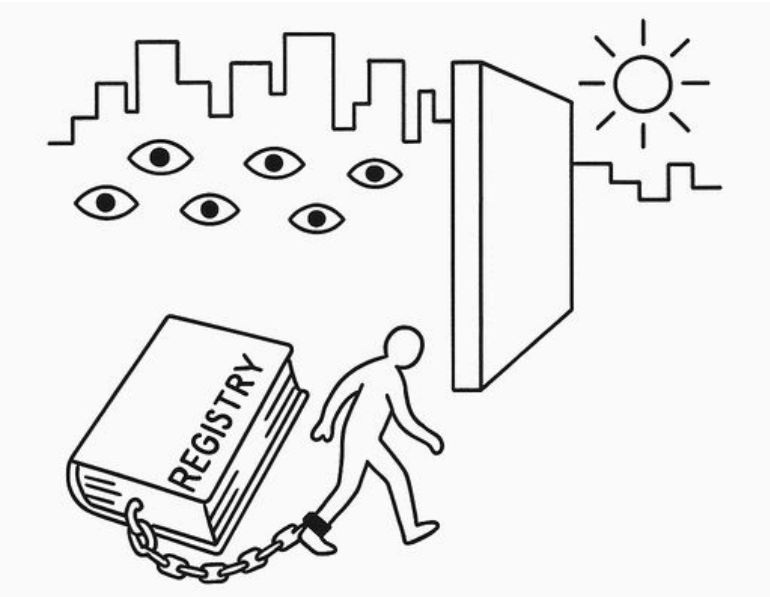
Once again, a pathway toward redemption has been blocked — not by our actions, but by a system still unwilling to account for growth, change, and humanity.

If you believe in growth, in second chances, and in the idea that no one should be defined solely by their worst moment, we ask you to carry this story forward. Write to your legislators. Share this article. Talk to others. Real lives hang in the balance — and your voice can help tip the scales toward justice. ▫

The Illinois Murder Registry

Is it making anyone safer?

By Abdul-Malik Muhammad



In 2012, Illinois established the Murder and Violent Offender Against Youth Registry (MVOAY), commonly called the "Illinois Murder Registry."

While its stated purpose is to track violent offenders and protect public safety, the reality is far more troubling. According to the Chicago Torture Justice Center, fewer than half of those listed on the registry have committed crimes involving minors. Most of the crimes that require registration are not murders at all.

Rather than promoting rehabilitation and public safety, the registry imposes severe burdens on returning citizens, perpetuating cycles of punishment and surveillance. Its impact disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly Black and Brown individuals, and creates financial, social, and emotional barriers that hinder reintegration into society.

This article will examine the Illinois Murder Registry's financial impact, racial disparities, and constitutional violations.

In response, I issue a call to action to abolish this punitive system and build a pathway toward justice and equity for returning citizens.

The Creation and Impact of the Registry

The Illinois Murder Registry was modeled after the sex offender registry, first established in 1986. Over time, registries have expanded to include nonsexual crimes and offenses involving minors.

Today, Illinois is one of only five states with a registry for violent offenders, alongside Montana, Indiana, Oklahoma, and Kansas.

In Illinois, individuals on the registry must report their vehicles, residences, and places of employment. This information grants law enforcement, including the Chicago Police Department (CPD), expansive authority to monitor and investigate individuals. These powers often lead to unconstitutional actions, such as unwarranted traffic stops or searches based solely on an officer's "gut feeling."

Registrants must remain on the list for ten years and reregister annually, with no formal notification system for when their registration period ends. This lack of clarity often results in accidental noncompliance, leading to further punishment or reincarceration.

As Lynn Green, a graduate of NPEP and former intern for Illinois state Sen. Rachel Ventura, explains: "The Illinois Murder Registry places an undue burden on returning citizens. Noncompliance — whether due to mistakes in registration or system errors — can result in re-incarceration, undermining the progress made by recent criminal justice reforms and compounding the challenges of reintegration."

Data reveals that most individuals returned to prison from the registry are not reoffending but are incarcerated for technical violations, such as missed deadlines or clerical errors. Rather than supporting rehabilitation, the registry appears designed to create additional obstacles for those attempting to reintegrate into society.

The Human and Social Cost of the Registry

For returning citizens, the registry's financial, social, and emotional burdens are immense. An initial $20 registration fee is followed by a $10 annual renewal fee — costs that may seem minor but are often prohibitive for individuals released after decades in prison with limited resources or job prospects. Beyond the cost to register, violations — whether accidental or warranted, or engineered by law enforcement — incur a mandatory $500 fine and mandatory jail time. In addition, the stigma of being listed makes it significantly harder for returning citizens to find housing, employment, or community support — further perpetuating cycles of marginalization.

As it is currently implemented, the registry also costs Illinois taxpayers millions of dollars, stemming largely from the fact that violations are categorized as felonies, incurring costs for housing the violators in jail, conducting trials, and reincarceration. Data from the Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council (SPAC) reveals that simply reclassifying the violations as misdemeanors would save taxpayers millions of dollars each year by decreasing the cost to enforce the registry, thus leaving funds that could be reallocated. Investing those funds in underdeveloped communities of color would have a far greater impact on public safety than perpetuating a punitive system.

Systemic Bias and Violations of Rights

The registry also raises significant ethical and legal questions. The registry's disproportionate impact on Black and Brown communities is undeniable. According to The Chicago 400 Campaign, which advocates for repealing public conviction registries, 60% of individuals on the Illinois Murder Registry are Black — despite Black residents comprising only 12.4% of the state's population. (Similarly, one in every 84 Black men in Illinois is listed on the state's sex offender registry.)

In addition, the registry often subjects individuals to unwarranted searches and traffic stops, violating their constitutional rights. Its broad application has led to systemic injustices, as seen in M.A. v. Illinois, where the court ruled that the registry violated due process and equal protection for a 13-year-old girl.

Does the registry improve public safety?

Research by the Chicago Torture Justice Center argues conclusively that public registries cause more harm than good. They destabilize returning citizens and serve as obstacles to reintegration, which is critical to prevent recidivism. As legal scholar J.J. Prescott argues, by eroding opportunities and keeping people under constant surveillance, "Public registries turn people into pariahs. Prison as a threat only works if you have something to lose."

Finally, the data shows that there is no significant difference between the recidivism rate of those on the registry and those who are not. The registry provides the illusion that the state is improving public safety, but that is all that it is: an illusion.

These concerns highlight the registry's failure to enhance public safety. Instead, it reinforces bias and creates unnecessary hurdles for individuals attempting to rebuild their lives.

A Call to Action

The Illinois Murder Registry does not protect public safety. Instead, it disproportionately targets marginalized communities, creates insurmountable barriers for returning citizens, and wastes taxpayer resources.

Efforts to end the registry, led by organizations like the Chicago Torture Justice Center and the Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council, represent a crucial step toward a fairer, more just system. Illinois can move closer to a future where public safety and rehabilitation coexist by reallocating resources, reducing racial disparities, and promoting effective reintegration strategies.

It's time to end the Illinois Murder Registry. Together, we can create a system that prioritizes justice, equality, and the opportunity for all individuals to rebuild their lives. ▪

Language of the Law

Facing a lifetime in prison, Paul Forbes turned to the law library to rewrite his narrative.

By Paul Forbes

Illustration by Hugo Ocon

On August 24, 2015, the bars slammed shut, and I began pacing back and forth in the cell, silently asking myself, *What have I done?*

I replayed everything that had transpired, realizing I was in deep trouble. I knew I had committed a serious crime, but I had no idea how to help myself. I didn't understand the law or know a good lawyer who could take my case. That night, I lay awake staring at the ceiling, wondering what their investigation would prove.

Three days later, at my first court date, I was nervous and afraid. During the investigation, I learned that two people had lost their lives because of my actions. I didn't know what to expect as I stood before the judge and listened to the counts in my indictment. When I heard multiple counts of first-degree murder and several counts of fleeing and eluding, my jaw dropped, and my heart skipped a beat. I was facing a sentence of 40 to 120 years, with no possibility of early release.

At 25 years old, I would be between 65 and 145 years old upon release.

This is what you deserve, part of me thought. But another part knew that wasn't my intention. Hearing words and terms I didn't understand, I realized that if I wanted to breathe fresh air again, I needed to learn the language of the law.

The following day, I started asking older men on the tier about the words and terms I'd heard in court. They directed me to the law library, and I began my journey to understand the judicial system. I recalled a childhood memory from third grade, when my teacher, Mrs. Washington, gave us 10 words each week to study. We had to write each word 10 times, find its meaning, and use it in a sentence. I applied the same method to learning legal terms.

That night, I submitted a request slip to visit the law library. A week later, I was sitting in the dayroom watching the five o'clock news when the correctional officer came by with the mail. I received notice that I was approved to visit the law library and a letter from my older brother, Calvin Merritte. In the letter, Calvin told me I was being overcharged and directed me to specific library resources: the Illinois Compiled Statutes books, West's Smith-Hurd Illinois Compiled Statutes, and Black's Law Dictionary.

The Illinois Compiled Statutes explained the counts on my indictment and related mitigated offenses. The Smith-Hurd books contained case law and outcomes to help prepare arguments and anticipate the state's response. Black's Law Dictionary defined the legal terms used in the courtroom. Armed with these tools, I gained the confidence to speak up in court and challenge my lawyer when we met.

For instance, when my lawyer insisted on a jury trial, I argued for a bench trial, understanding that my case relied solely on legal interpretation. I believed the average person lacked the legal knowledge necessary to serve as a fair juror. My decision to opt for a bench trial would later prove beneficial.

Although I had only a beginner's understanding of the law, I quickly realized the state's attorney's objective was not justice for the victims' families but to exact an eye-for-an-eye punishment. This infuriated me because I expected fairness in a court of law. I was wrong. I knew I had to take responsibility for my actions, but the judicial system prepared me for a different battle: fighting for my life.

As I read more cases and researched further, I became aware of the carceral injustices within the judicial system. I saw police officers lie on the stand, give false testimonies, tamper with evidence, and submit coerced confessions — all without facing the consequences. This deepened my resolve to understand the law.

Using a prison kiosk computer system to research legal information, I studied reckless homicide, a lesser charge than first-degree murder. My research led me to two key cases: Belk and Schmidt. By "shepardizing" these cases (using a legal citator to find related rulings), I found precedents where appellate courts reversed decisions due to circumstances similar to mine. These cases helped me argue that my actions, though reckless, were not intentional, resulting in a reduced charge of reckless homicide.

In April 2018, my bench trial began. I was appropriately fearful but prepared. For four days, I watched the state's attorneys portray me as a lawless monster. My lawyer, however, acknowledged my actions and demonstrated how the facts of the case aligned with reckless homicide rather than first-degree murder. The judge agreed, and because I had chosen a bench trial, they had the authority to reduce my charge and sentence me under the correct statute.

The trial ended that month, but my case continued until June for a pre-sentencing investigation (PSI). During the PSI, my life was put under a microscope. Every action I'd taken as an adult — excluding juvenile history — was scrutinized to assess my rehabilitation potential.

At sentencing, I felt at peace because I fought for a sentence I deserved, not the one the state's attorneys had sought. The judge sentenced me to 24 years, but under the law, I was only required to serve 50% of that time if I met certain conditions. This meant I could be released in just a few years — a far cry from the effective lifetime sentence I had initially faced.

The judicial system I encountered isn't about fairness but punishment. My journey to understand the language of the law taught me that knowledge is powerful, education is transformative, and justice is not always served — we must sometimes fight for it. ▪

Updates From the Legislature

By Lynn Green

People v. Estrada: A Ray of Hope for the Youth Left Behind

In February 2024, the Illinois Appellate Court reversed a 71-year sentence given to a man who committed a crime at age 23. The court determined that the sentence violated the Illinois Constitution's proportionate penalties clause because it failed to account for the defendant's age at the time of the offense and his clear progress toward rehabilitation. The case — People v. Estrada — has become a persuasive example of how courts may begin to apply the growing body of research on emerging adulthood in sentencing and resentencing decisions.

Who This Affects

This decision affects many members of the NPEP community — specifically, those who were over 18 but under 26 when they committed their offenses. While this is not a binding legal precedent (because it was filed under Rule 23), it is still considered persuasive law, a case that cannot be formally cited in most legal briefs but can influence judges' thinking and support arguments for second chances.

Overcoming Legal Barriers

What makes this case even more important is what it overcame. Mr. Estrada had previously filed multiple postconviction petitions — typically a red flag for courts to reject a case under the rule of res judicata, which bars issues that have already been decided. But because of a change to Illinois Supreme Court Rule 23(e) in 2021, courts can now consider nonprecedential cases like Estrada for persuasive value.

That means others in similar positions — those who've matured, educated themselves, taken responsibility — might be able to argue for a second chance even after prior rejections.

Why This Matters

Traditionally, the law drew a hard line at age 18. After that, young people were treated as fully responsible adults. But science — and now, increasingly, the courts — tell a different story. Research on brain development has shown that reasoning, impulse control, and emotional regulation continue to mature well into the mid-20s.

The Estrada case acknowledges this science. The defendant was 23 when he committed the offense and received a decades-long sentence. Yet he had made significant progress while incarcerated. The court found that the sentencing judge misunderstood the law, believing a lower sentence wasn't allowed, and that the defendant's lawyer failed to bring up case law that might have changed the outcome. The case was sent back for resentencing.

This opens a new door. For those who were over 21 when their crime occurred — but still within this "emerging adulthood" window — Estrada provides a foothold for asking the courts to take growth, age, and potential for rehabilitation into account.

A Note of Caution — and Hope

It's important to remember that a persuasive case doesn't guarantee the same outcome. The Estrada decision holds sway, but it doesn't bind the court to act in the same way for everyone. Still, it represents a shift — one that sees young people not as static or irredeemable, but as capable of growth.

In the state of Illinois, there is hope rooted in science, in law, and in the lived stories of people working every day to change. For emerging adults navigating the legal system, People v. Estrada offers more than a case number. It offers a sign that the door to redemption is not fully closed.

Spirituality

Beyond Religion 69-70
Ramon “Ben Khayil” Montague

Beyond Religion

Exploring spirit, self, and the search for harmony beyond religious tradition.

by Ramon "Ben Khayil" Montague

Most people see spirituality as an extension of religion. I don't.

Spirituality is an individual journey rooted in a personal connection to the Creator. By contrast, religion offers a communal framework for shared worship. For me, these two are separate and distinct when it comes to aligning with the Creator's plan.

Spirituality deals with the unification of a person on two levels:

- **The individual level:** Integration and unity within oneself, leading to an understanding of one's existential purpose.
- **The level with the rest of creation:** Recognizing the essence of oneself as unified with the essence of the Creator.

Being unified with the essence of the Creator allows individuals to connect with all of creation. We are intrinsically linked to all living entities: the trees that provide oxygen for us to breathe, the water that sustains life, and the very ecosystem we depend on. All these elements are intricately connected.

I have practiced Al-Islam and, for the past 32 years, I have practiced Hebraism. Neither — though most Hebrews do not equate Hebraism with religion — offered me the spiritual connection I found through studying metaphysics.

Metaphysics, a branch of philosophy, explores the fundamental nature of reality, being, cosmology, and often epistemology. Through studying metaphysics, I gained the knowledge I needed to understand the nature of being, my existential purpose in cosmology, and the essence of the Creator, which is spirit.

Once I reconciled the understanding that the Creator is spirit and that my essence is spirit, this knowledge of interconnectedness birthed an epiphany: a clear and profound sense of spirituality.

Though religion has its purpose in providing a communal framework for worship, it did not nurture my spirituality — that is, my sense of interconnectedness to the Creator and creation. Metaphysics gave me an understanding of my purpose in creation and connected me to the Creator by recognizing that both share the essence of spirit.

The ultimate goal of spirituality is to achieve harmony, interconnectedness. This can only be accomplished by first becoming one with yourself (spirit), then with the Creator, and finally with the creation.

By understanding this inter-connectedness, we can live in greater harmony with the world around us. For a deeper exploration of this idea, please refer to the following page. ▪

TO DEEPEN YOUR SPIRITUALITY...

If you are seeking to deepen your spirituality, try this month-long mindful journaling practice to explore your connection to yourself, the Creator, and creation:

1

WEEK ONE

Spend five minutes each day reflecting on moments of connection.

Ask yourself:

- What brought me peace today?
- How did I feel connected to the world around me?

2

WEEK TWO

Increase to seven minutes, focusing on your purpose.

Consider:

- How am I aligning with my role in creation?
- What steps can I take to nurture harmony within myself?

3

WEEK THREE

Spend 10 minutes journaling about your relationship with the Creator.

Reflect on:

- What strengthens my connection to the Creator?
- How do I see this connection in my life?

4

WEEK FOUR

Dedicate 15 minutes to integrating insights.

Explore:

- How has this practice shaped my understanding of spirituality?
- What actions can I take to live in greater harmony?

By the end of the month, you may feel more grounded in your spirituality and connected to your purpose. Small steps can lead to lasting transformation.

Motivation

Stranded on a Bridge 72-73
Fly Miller

Stranded on a Bridge

In the latest edition of "On the Rise With Fly," how Hurricane Katrina stirred an awakening.

By Fly Miller

In 2005, a massive hurricane descended on the city of New Orleans, Louisiana, breaking the levees and flooding the city. Hundreds, if not thousands, of New Orleanians died, and thousands more were stranded on roofs, in cars, on top of bridges.

This tragic phenomenon has had a powerful impact on my life. I remember faithfully watching the CNN news coverage of the horrific event. There were dead bodies floating in the floodwaters, flowing down the streets of New Orleans. The strangest thing is that I only remember seeing Black people crying for help, holding SOS signs, and trying to get someone to rescue them from sudden death.

I want to direct your attention to one scene, where hundreds of civilians were stranded on a bridge. This event went on for three days.

After the first day, I was hopeful that the U.S. government would render aid. NO SHOW! Then on day two, I knew that aid would come. But still, NO SHOW! Day after day, I saw the same individuals walking back and forth on that same bridge, and still no assistance from the government.

Where on earth was the United States government? In one of the richest nations in the world, one of its cities was underwater and looked like a developing country. *Why hasn't the government sent aid to these people after 48 hours without food or water?*

I observed people who looked like me, who appeared to go through the same hardships in life as I did. Most of all, I saw what appeared to be drug addicts and crack babies running up and down the bridge, after two days without a change of Pampers.

Why would these people be left to fend for themselves? What type of government would do this to its citizens?

During the coverage, a news reporter on the CNN broadcast said, "President George W. Bush just flew over the scene in Air Force One." Surely the president has now witnessed this atrocity firsthand and aid will be arriving swiftly. After several hours had passed, still NO SHOW!

I felt sad for those individuals trapped on that bridge, and although I'd never met them, I felt like they were my kin. I felt empathy from more than 700 miles away, in a prison cell at Menard Correctional Center.

Five years prior, I had been arrested and sent to the Cook County Jail. I was young, immature, and unruly. I did not really care about anyone, let alone care about building bridges.

I was a drug dealer, a gang-banger, and now a murderer. After several brawls, a few stints in segregation, and a guilty verdict, I was sentenced to 53 years in prison. The reality of a half-century sentence smacked me hard, like a bridge had collapsed under my feet, splashing down into the murky waters.

Before leaving the county jail, an inmate I knew, Squeak, had a revelation in a dream: "God told me that you would be found guilty of your crime, you'd do some time in prison, but that you'd go home, and be the leader of your people."

A friend of mine, from before I got arrested, heard this and laughed really hard. "You'll lead them off a cliff," he said. "You're too stupid to be a leader." His comments and actions took me aback, but they lit a fire inside of me. I vowed that when I got free, I would be a good leader. I would not lead my people off a cliff, but over a bridge of prosperity.

The tragic event that took place in New Orleans made me reflect on the lives that I impacted in my neighborhood and along my journey of destructive behavior. How had I left so many of my people stranded, like President Bush did? I flew over them, leaving them on a bridge stranded somewhere between hope and despair.

Before I was arrested, I remember attending a neighborhood watch meeting to do reconnaissance. I listened to community members reveal a plot to stage a large-scale protest on the streets where we sold drugs. The following day, they began marching, holding anti-drug signs, chanting, "No more rocks [cocaine], no more blows [heroin], on this block no more." The marching and chanting went on for days. The marchers were rescuing the neighborhood from the floodwaters of despair, building a bridge to a safer community.

All I had to do was pick up a sign and join the construction of that bridge. But due to my own immaturity and selfish reasoning, I mocked them, laughed at their efforts openly, and chose money over saving the community. That bridge was never built, and the people of the community remained stranded.

The scene on that fateful bridge in New Orleans compelled me to see all of the bridges I had burned, but most importantly, the people I had hurt. I was suddenly overcome by a moment of clarity. I needed to repair those bridges that I had once scorched.

Had I known better, I could have done better for my community. I could have built recreational centers for at-risk youth. I could have gone to school for journalism or started a nonprofit. I could have become an entrepreneur and hired people from the community, giving them jobs, not drugs.

I asked a question that would guide me for the years to come: *How could I build a bridge of hope?* Without tools, I couldn't build anything, so I knew I needed to get myself an education.

I earned my GED in 2009. By 2015, I had written and completed my first novel, "*Savage Beast*." Soon after, I earned an associate degree in theology, then joined NPEP, where I completed an associate degree from Oakton College, was named a Presidential Scholar, and was inducted into the Phi Theta Kappa honor society. I recently finished my Bachelor of Science degree with a major in social sciences from Northwestern University's School of Professional Studies, and today I serve as a columnist for the *Northwestern Insider.*

Becoming a motivational speaker is one of my life's goals. It is the genesis of this column that has the goal of helping people, a bridge for all people to cross.

I did a lot of self-reflecting during those three days of horror for the New Orleanians suffering at the hands of nature and the U.S. government. Eventually, on the third day, help came for those hungry and dying of thirst on that bridge in southern Louisiana. But the damage was done: the government had exposed their hand and revealed it didn't give a damn about Black folks. It also showed me that neither did I.

Witnessing the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the tragedy on that bridge of hopelessness, I questioned my soul. How could I not have given a damn about the community? I had loitered on their corners, sold drugs to their relatives, and robbed them of their goods. I was a nuisance, destroying the very fabric of any bridge-worthy institution — and any notion that I gave a damn.

After 19 years, I've kept my promise to change. I'm writing this in hopes of reaching others who have sold drugs or contributed to the harm of Black and Brown communities. We can't wait for anyone else to fix what's broken. If we don't protect and rebuild our communities ourselves, no one will.

American jails are full, and they are filled with Black and Brown men and women who have left their families and friends in their communities, stranded on a bridge with no food or water. Stranded without any hope in sight. Stranded, waiting for the United States government to save them. The truth is, the government will not come.

We must start building bridges to rescue ourselves and our loved ones. We must do this by becoming good leaders, and showing the community what good leadership looks like. ▪

Restorative Justice

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What Do Parenthood and Family Mean to You?

By Abdul-Malik Muhammad

Following a season where we celebrate Mother's and Father's Days, we are excited to present this issue's Restorative Justice prompt: *What do parenthood or family mean to you?* There are many hindrances to parenthood and family in a carceral system: 20-minute phone calls, restrictive visits, video visits, delayed and inconsistent emails, snail mail correspondence, and a lack of transportation to faraway facilities. There are countless more.

Given the importance of family, especially when we are incarcerated, it is crucial that we work to overcome these challenges and build and maintain strong relationships with our families. Practicing restorative justice can help us focus on repairing the harm we have caused in our families and build relationships based on empathy and accountability.

We begin this issue's column with two perspectives on restorative justice and family from two NPEP Restorative Justice practitioners: Professor Annalise Buth and NPEP alumnus William "Shafiq" Peeples. Then members of the NPEP community share what family and parenthood mean to them. ▪

Learning from Family

Professor Annalise Buth, Northwestern Pritzker School of Law

Families provide one of the best opportunities for restorative justice learning and practice. Today, I am home with my sick toddler Troi, and I'm immersed in lessons about boundaries because I know that I need to be present for him. Troi has become one of my greatest teachers.

I am practicing making space for Troi to experience and express feelings, working on healthy communication, identifying and communicating needs, and saying sorry when I mess up. I am continually reflecting on what a right relationship looks like in my family, not only as a parent but also as a spouse, child, sister, and aunt. This learning is messy in every sense — literally and figuratively — and it's far from easy. But it's beautiful.

Through the years, many students have described restorative justice to me as feeling held and supported. This is one of my deepest hopes for Troi. Restorative justice within families makes transformation a lived, daily reality. ▪

Repairing Harm, Rebuilding Family

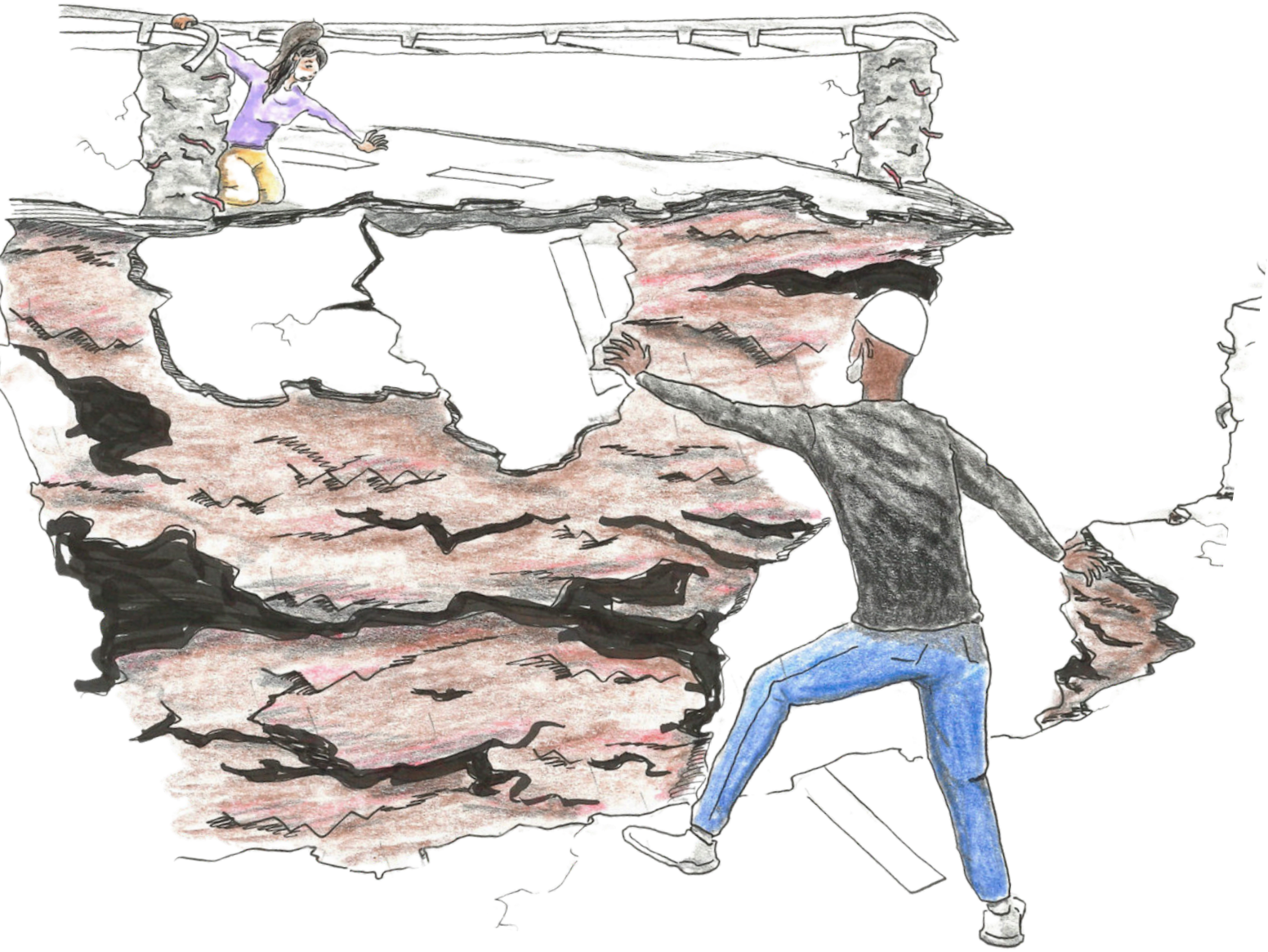
by William "Shafiq" Peeples, Restorative Justice Fellow

At its root, RJ is about returning folks in conflict to right relationship with one another. It is a healthy, nonpunitive, nonretributive means of settling disputes, repairing harm, and fostering atonement and reconciliation between individuals and communities when harm occurs.

It has been said that family is the bedrock of society. If that is true, then where is RJ more essential than in the parent-child relationship? If we can instill RJ principles and practices into the hearts and minds of parents and children, we can create a new paradigm for resolving conflict in our homes — one that will ripple into our schools, workplaces, and all spheres of interpersonal relations.

As incarcerated humans who are also fathers, mothers, grandmothers, and grandfathers, we have a pivotal role to play in spreading RJ to our families. Our communities are hotbeds of violence where harm is constant and cyclical. Crime, poverty, drugs, and miseducation undergird the Prison Industrial Complex, and RJ is a liberating tool we can use to prevent, address, and resolve harm outside the criminal legal system.

Lastly — and most importantly — the carceral system is designed to alienate us from our children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews, ensuring we don't build deep bonds of love and guidance with future generations. We must resist the incarceration of our minds, spirits, and voices. We must demolish and render inoperable the Prison Industrial Complex, which disproportionately draws its human material from Black, Brown, and poor white communities. Teaching, practicing, and modeling RJ to our children is an act of prison abolition. ▪



A LONG ROAD BACK

By William "Shafiq" Peeples

Illustration by Jason Gorham

As the restorative justice fellow for fall quarter 2024, I was asked by my friend and colleague Abdul-Malik Muhammad to write an article for the RJ column of the *Northwestern Insider*. Our focus is on parenting using RJ principles and values.

As a parent the hardest thing I ever had to do was admit to my only daughter that I am, in fact, guilty of the murder that sent me to Death Row over three decades ago.

At the time, I'd not heard of RJ, nor did I have a working knowledge of RJ principles, but what I did know was that our relationship would never be healthy or authentic as long as she was operating from the false premise of my innocence.

I also recognized that the first step in repairing the harm I'd caused my victim was that I take full, unequivocal responsibility for my actions.

My first few conversations with my daughter did not go well. There was anger, a sense of betrayal, horror at what I'd done to another human being, not to mention the fact that the victim was also a woman, just like my own daughter!

In that moment of coming clean, I lost decades of trust, my image as a loving father tarnished by the knowledge that I could commit such a violent act. How could the man she loved and idolized be a murderer? And since

I lied about that, what else had I lied about? Returning myself to right relationship with my daughter was a long and arduous undertaking, and it has taken over a decade for me to regain her trust, faith, respect, and admiration.

Where we are today is the result of countless hours of open, authentic, and honest discourse. I had to humbly take her opinion, questions, and doubts and respond to them without recrimination or defensiveness.

For her part, my daughter had to openly listen, reserve judgment, and empathetically receive my truth.

There were times when we'd exchange barbed emails, or stare icily at one another during a visit. In fact, there were months where we would not communicate or visit at all, because the wounds of betrayal, lies, and distrust would not allow us to "see" one another with loving clarity.

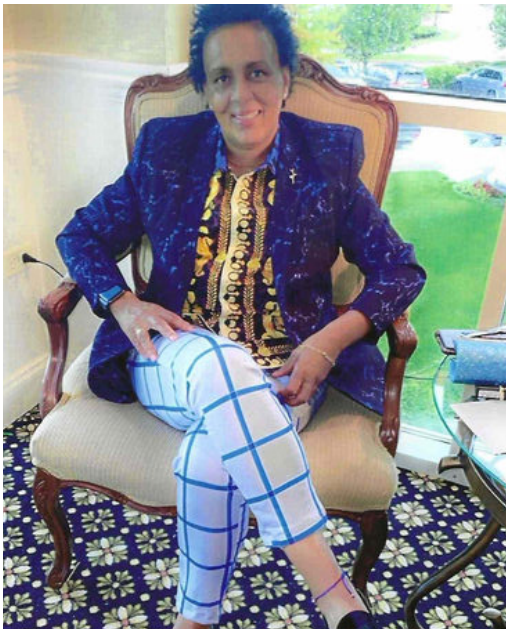
Still, we persevered; we held onto the hope of retrieving the father-daughter bond that my lies had destroyed.

By God's grace and the expansiveness of my daughter's heart, we are close again, not like we were before, but miles away from the estrangement that once felt like an unbridgeable chasm between us.

I hope my story inspires, and encourages other parents, incarcerated or not, to begin the restorative process of reconciling with their beloved children. ▫

MY MOTHER, MY AUNT, MY FOUNDATION

By Jason Samuels



What is family? Well, for me, family is my mother (Annette Jackson) and my aunt (Darlene English).

Any time I am at my lowest points, they are there to pull me back up. In my weak moments, they pour strength into me. Since my birth, they've sacrificed meals so I wouldn't go hungry.

They went without clothes, coats, and boots so I could be warm. Because of my mother's and aunt's sacrifice, support, and unconditional love, I have been able to overcome many of life's shortcomings.

Family is the two women responsible for the man I am today.

A QUEEN WITHOUT A CROWN

By Will Williams

Being born December 31 was good in theory, but in a household with a total of ten children, it was tough. I now share stories with my mother of how sad I was as a child because by the time my birthday arrived, there was no money to buy me a gift. But she would always sit me down and prepare the best cake I ever ate. I began to look forward to receiving a cake more than a gift on my birthday. I was even allowed to eat the chocolate icing from the spoon she used.

We have always been a very tight-knit family who respect and love our "Queen" (as my mother was called by most). My mother was born in 1946 in Mississippi, during a time when racism and hardships were a daily struggle for Black Americans. She married at the young age of 14 and had six kids before migrating to Chicago in 1970, where she gave birth to her seventh (and most gifted) child: me. Since coming into my knowing as a baby, I watched her make miracles happen that seemed impossible to accomplish. We were a family of "hand-me downs," yet we always had just enough to make it until the next government paycheck.

She didn't receive any education, but she made certain we did. She didn't eat on some days we were low on food, but she made certain we did. She didn't believe in seeing a physician for health-related issues, but she made certain we were seen. She didn't believe that there was someone to love her as the loving mother that she was, but she made certain we understood the importance of loving one another and respecting others in the same loving manner we first learned through her loving us. ▪

THIS IS WHAT FAMILY LOOKS LIKE

Margaret DeFrancisco and her daughter, Aurora.

By Margaret DeFrancisco

An overwhelming sense of pride washes over me whenever I speak about being a parent. I am the proud parent of the most precious soul that's ever walked the earth. The moment I realized I was pregnant, I told myself my child would always know without a doubt that they were loved.

I also remember what it was like to be a child. Everything doesn't need to be serious. Dwight Correctional Center had an actual sand park equipped with slides, swings, and a set of monkey bars. When my daughter came to visit for Saturday camp, surrounding circumstances disappeared into the background. Dwight has long been closed, and my daughter is now 21 years old, but those moments remain.

Being incarcerated has definitely created enormous hurdles, but nothing has broken our bond. Mothering has given me the insight to realize how important it is to listen, provide guidance, and offer suggestions.

Open communication has strengthened trust and honesty and helped shape the both of us.

By Ashley Maloney, NPEP volunteer

From my mom, an elementary school teacher, I learned that teachers often become more than educators. They become chosen family. I watched her stay after school to decorate her classroom for birthdays and holidays, attend her students' plays and sports games, and offer her time and heart well beyond the classroom. Her example taught me that parenting is not about titles. It is about showing up and being there, not just when it's easy, but when it's needed the most.

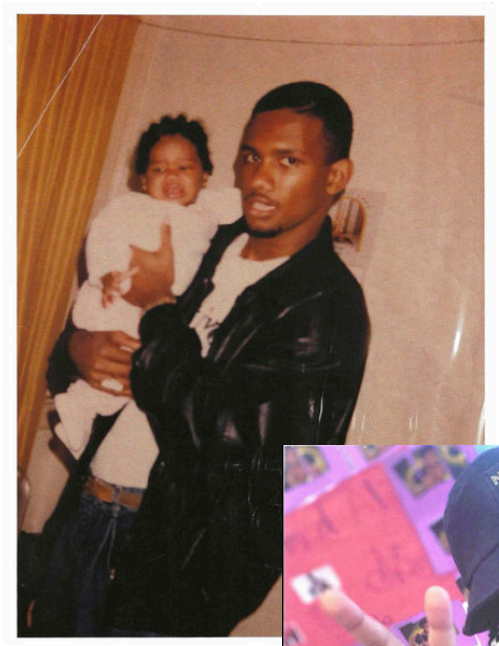
Educators, like parents, support and build a community where everyone feels cared for and valued.

I saw this when coaching soccer to children ages 3 to 8. Whether it was cheering from the sidelines or offering words of encouragement, I realized that even the smallest acts of care can have the biggest impact. In NPEP, I found a community rooted in resilience and shared growth, where mentorship and learning help individuals thrive academically and personally.

Making someone feel safe, seen, and heard. That is what family means to me.

CRYSTAL CLEAR

By Patrick Comi



Crystal, you are high quality,

The epitome of virtuosity,

Calibrated to the highest frequencies,

Capable of emitting light.

Crystal, you are the manifestation of JAH Almighty.

When you transmit your JAH mind,

JAH's enemies will take flight.

I've looked deep into your crystal clear eyes,

I saw NO FEAR.

I see sheer glee.

My beautiful daughter, who rejuvenates me.

Crystal, I gave you life but you've given me eternity.

Crystal, you are distinct because your thinking is Crystal clear. ▫

RESTORING HOUSE HARRIS

By Anthony Harris

What family means to me is "leaving an inheritance to my children's children" (Proverbs, 13:22). Northwestern has given me this opportunity to receive a high-quality education that will enable me to make a living for myself and my family. I have two children, a 28-year-old daughter named Anna and a 20-year-old son named Ashton. I am a junior to my father, Anthony S. Harris Sr. My father's nickname, when he competed in martial arts tournaments, was Tony "Iron Fist" Harris. So, Iron Fist will be our family sign, and our family saying comes from the Greek playwright Sophocles: "Certainly thou art iron, like thy name."

My father expects me to come home and finish restoring House Harris to its glory, to put House Harris in a position to have a dynasty that will last a thousand years. My son Ashton is the male heir after me. His full name is Ashton Saige Harris, in keeping with the tradition of the Harrises having the initials "A.S.H." Tradition is important in the Harris Family, and NPEP has afforded me the chance to continue the family tradition of receiving a bachelor's degree.

It is now my duty as the heir to House Harris to take this once-in-a-lifetime educational opportunity to receive an elite education from a top 10 university, and to be a shining example to my father, to my daughter, and to my son of what an education can do to transform.

When I graduate and when my son graduates, there will be four generations of Harrises with at least a bachelor's degree. My grandfather Charles Harris started the tradition of bachelor's degree graduates, and it has continued with my father, my daughter, and soon myself and my son. Education is important in my family, second only to God. My family are educators who have dedicated their lives to teaching society's future. I want to carry on that tradition, and I believe it's possible to make a living while also making a positive impact.

"I am the Prodigal Son, now coming to my senses" (Luke 15:17). I am now ready to lead House Harris, for like Alexandre Dumas's Musketeer d'Artagnan, I have "thews [muscles] of iron and a wrist of steel." It matters to me what my two kids think of me. I want my kids to be able to say, "Yes, my dad went to prison, but look at what he did while he was in prison. He graduated from Northwestern University and he has now come home and is an asset to the family and not a liability." ▫

HOUSE HARRIS COAT OF ARMS

By Anthony Harris

Illustration by Oscar Gutierrez

The two fists are modeled after the actual fists of Anthony S. Harris Sr., shown in a martial arts pose. The black belt with ten white stripes signifies his rank as a tenth-degree black belt.

At the top of the shield is a book, symbolizing education, a proud Harris family tradition. In the bottom right corner are the Harris initials: A.S.H.

Lastly, the quotation on the shield — "Certainly thou art iron, like thy name" — is our family saying. This quote reflects our pride, our strength, and our legacy. We come from a strong man — my grandfather — and thanks to my father, iron has entered our souls. ▪

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JANICE NORA LACKEY AWARD FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

NPEP is proud to announce the winners and honorable mentions from the second annual Janice Nora Lackey Award for Academic Excellence, named in honor of Janice Nora Lackey (1940–2012), who was a lifelong learner, a believer in the uniquely empowering nature of education, and the inspiration for the founding of NPEP. This annual award is supported by a donation from Jennifer Lackey, Baron Reed, Isabella Reed, and Catherine Reed.

To be eligible for the Lackey Award, an essay must have been written for an NPEP course. NPEP received more than 20 essay submissions for consideration. Each essay was read by two members of an anonymous panel of three NPEP faculty members, who provided notes and a preliminary assessment. Essays that received two positive votes were then read by the third committee member. All of the essays were discussed and evaluated against the criteria identified in the award announcement: clarity of writing, creativity, argumentative strength, and level of development. Winning essays and honorable mentions were chosen from both Sheridan and Logan.

Winners:

De'Andre Robinson, "Leveraging Social-Emotional Learning for Black Students"

Melinda Warfel, "Rawls on Justice as Pertaining to the Domestic Violence Law"

Honorable Mentions:

Demetrius Cunningham, "Black Honor Culture: The Invisible Social Pathway to Chicago's Gang Violence"

Regina DeFrancisco, "Civil Asset Forfeiture"

Paul Modrowski, "Wonderful Adventures: Winning Over a Country"

Readers can find the two winning essays on the following pages.

Below is a drawing of Janice Nora Lackey, created by Anthony Ehlers, an NPEP graduate. On the following page, an illustration of the award by NPEP student Jason Gorham.

Jason Burham

Janice Nora Lackey Award Winner

RAWLS ON JUSTICE AS PERTAINING TO THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LAW

by Melinda Warfel

Justice is defined in the Merriam-Webster's dictionary as "the administration of what is just (by assigning merited rewards or punishments)."

According to author John Rawls in his article "Justice as Fairness," there must invariably be a justification for deviation from equal liberty, and the burden of proof regarding this departure is on those who divert from it. Therefore, Rawls would agree with that assertion as it stands, that the recent domestic violence law is unjust. "Each person participating in a practice, or affected by it, has an equal right to the most extensive liberty compatible with a like liberty for all" (Rawls, 1958, pg. 165). Under the domestic violence law, the only individuals who may utilize its rhetoric are those serving time due to a conviction. The domestic abuse survivors who took a plea in their case are excluded completely. Obviously, in the assemblage of domestic violence survivors, the above-mentioned liberty for all is ostensibly absent.

Rawls asks readers to embrace the idea that people have similar needs and concerns, so that working jointly is possible. For that reason, he would allow the argument, all domestic violence survivors are powerless, and being similarly situated, none can dominate any other.

In accordance with Rawlsian theory, legitimate complaints were established, and as a result the law provided some relief for domestic violence survivors. Unfortunately, only a select few benefited from reform, rendering the entire process unjust. "Questions of justice arise when conflicting claims are made upon the design of practice and where . . . each person will insist . . . on what he considers his rights" (Rawls, 1958, p. 172). Rawls would agree with the contention that all those who suffer substantiated abuse should be able to cite those instances when being charged with a crime against their abuser. The accused should have the right to let mitigating circumstances be known. Ultimately, the goal is to make the punishment less harsh, severe, and painful. Rawls contends that the acknowledgment of moral principles will show in the acceptance of referencing them as reasons for claim limitation.

He further expresses that individuals acknowledge the burden of providing explanations when persons act defiantly in showing shame and remorse as well as an urge to make amends. The rationale is domestic violence survivors, who subsequently commit crimes against their abuser, strive to show shame and remorse as well as an immense desire to make amends to victims. However, they also wish to show the explanation or excuse (the domestic violence suffered) as indicative of why they chose to act contrary to the rules of law.

"There is, however, no reason why they (the people) should regard this position as final; for if there are inequalities . . . the immediate gain which equality would allow can be considered as intelligently invested in view of its future return" (Rawls, 1958, p. 173). It is the sincere hope that the domestic violence law, as it stands, is not final. Those impacted by violence expect the gain, which equality would allow, to be for all in order for everyone to reap the benefits equally. Rawls would grant, in seeing the principal conditions unmet, those agreements to a confined individual are deplorable at best. It is human nature to detest uncertainty and losing inalienable rights due to actual or perceived violation of the law resulting in ultimate mistrust. Already terrified and ignorant individuals, often having little to no understanding of the law, are manipulated into accepting an often spurious arrangement.

People are often offered pleas for a lesser, but not always applicable charge, and told if they do not agree there will be stiffer, harsher, and sometimes irreversible detrimental consequences. Prosecutors prey on already monumental fears and anxieties causing concessions that would not otherwise be made.

Then, one must also consider the postpartum depression (PPD) law. Originally, women afflicted with this debilitating mental illness were not allowed to use it as a mitigating factor. Fortunately, over the years, all women, regardless of a guilty verdict or plea bargain, were finally able to seek relief due to a PPD diagnosis. Domestic violence survivors are holding out for similar relief.

"Those impacted by violence expect the gain, which equality would allow, to be for all in order for everyone to reap the benefits equally . . . Already terrified and ignorant individuals, often having little to no understanding of the law, are manipulated into accepting an often spurious arrangement."

Rawls would allow the argument that, in a perfect world, injustice would never occur to begin with. In a utopian society, domestic violence wouldn't be an issue as each member would "love thy neighbor" and never wish to harm one another. In reality, the justice of practice does arise as individuals blatantly press their claims on others. When the government decides to provide relief for certain injustices, the entire practice is still unjust when only a segment of the population is affected. In recognizing the injustice the subsection of domestic violence survivors suffers, there are those who wish to right this wrong.

Rawls provides an outline of hope that certainly aligns with the views of ending the above-mentioned injustice. "The criterion for the recognition of suffering is helping one who suffers, acknowledging the duty of fair-play is a necessary part of the criterion for recognizing another as a person with similar interests and feelings as oneself" (Rawls 1958, pg. 182). The injustice incurred can and should be met with relief in order to finally point the social, legal, and moral compass in the right direction. ▪

Leveraging Social-Emotional Learning for Black Students: The Need for an Antiracist, Problem Posing, Social-Emotional Training Methodology for Teachers in Urban Schools

by De'Andre Robinson

For far too long, many children in urban communities have been left to navigate trauma with little to no understanding of how to manage their emotions (i.e., stress, shame, fear, anger, frustration, etc.) in a healthy and productive manner. Teaching children how to process, communicate, and regulate their emotions while simultaneously developing effective social skills offers numerous advantages for children and teenagers from all walks of life. This is especially true for Black and Brown children growing up exposed to poverty, criminalization, and violence in big cities like Chicago.

Moreover, the adverse effects that social media pose to the mental health of children and teenagers compound the need for the funding of both in-school and after-school programs where young people are taught early and often how to better process their emotions.

In 2003, the Illinois legislature passed the Children's Mental Health Act, which required the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to develop Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) standards, which in turn required that all public-school districts within the state file an SEL policy with the ISBE. The following year, Illinois became the first state in the country to develop specific SEL standards for K-12 students. Two decades have passed since the development of such standards, but questions about their effectiveness still linger (Hoffman). One such question is this: Can SEL be leveraged to help students from historically marginalized communities — specifically Black students attending urban schools — improve their academic prowess and social-emotional intelligence? The answer to this question is yes, but only if SEL is taught with equity and if the relationship between teacher and child is positively reinforced within the classroom, which will be spelled out in greater detail in the following pages. But first, a brief background and definition of SEL is required.

Although many have never heard of the term SEL, and those who have believe it to be a relatively new concept of learning within elementary and high schools, it has actually been around for a while. One of its founders, Dr. James P. Comer — a Black psychiatrist at Yale School of Medicine — first introduced the concept of SEL in New Haven, Connecticut, in the 1960s, while designing an intervention project for impoverished Black students attending elementary schools (Lohmann 12). He hypothesized that "merely focusing on improving test scores alone would not result in a better school or increase academic achievement." Instead, he advocated for the need to focus on the "whole child," which includes their social-emotional learning capacities (Pappas). The traditional way of thinking about the emotional learning of children has always been understood to be the responsibility of parents alone. But in this day and age, many parents either lack the knowledge or time to adequately teach their children concepts of SEL, which in turn shifts the responsibility to teachers and schools to ensure that children receive proper guidance in this respect.

According to Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a nationally recognized organization leading the work in this space, SEL refers to the ways in which children and adults obtain and effectively apply the knowledge and skills necessary to develop healthy identities, understand and manage emotions, show empathy for others, establish and maintain healthy relationships, and develop responsible decision-making skills (McCall et al. 4). More specifically, SEL is structured around five core competencies: 1) self-awareness, which entails the ability to understand one's own emotions — including what triggers them — and how they influence behavior; 2) self-management, which includes the ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behavior in different situations; 3) social-awareness, which includes the ability to understand the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures; 4) relationship skills, which (as previously mentioned) include the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships; and 5) responsible decision-making, which encompasses the ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations, including the capacity to consider and evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being (Jagers et al. 8).

Based on the definition of SEL, most people will readily agree that SEL has great potential to enhance both the intellectual and emotional intelligence of children and young adults. Where the agreement usually ends, however, is on the way it should be taught across different racial groups (Jones et al. 11-12). The current structuring of SEL as color-blind is problematic because it limits the ability for SEL to be taught in ways that validate and appreciate the trauma and ways of knowing relevant to Black students within urban settings (Fergus and Gregory 126). For example, SEL programs such as "Strong Kids" have been shown to be effective for Black kids (Ryan et al.; McCall et al. 6). Moreover, the 2020 unrest from the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police compounds the need for SEL to be taught in a manner that speaks to the realities of Black students.

Despite the potential benefits that students stand to gain from SEL in schools, if the curriculum and method of teaching it don't adequately reflect the culture and lived experiences of Black students, SEL will prove ineffective at improving their academic prowess and social-emotional intelligence (Legette et al. 284). The history of racial oppression committed against Black people has left a legacy of inequality within state, federal, and local administrative systems. This is especially true within the public school system. As a consequence, SEL is being taught and communicated to students of color in ways that fail to critically address existing power differentials across the spectrum of race, gender, and socioeconomic status (McCall et al. 5).

Take, for example, a Black student who experiences the trauma of racial profiling by the police in his community, and as a result develops a dislike for the police, and is triggered to experience fear and/or anger whenever he sees a police officer. How would this student benefit from a lesson about emotional regulation that focuses on how to cope with one's emotions and discusses larger societal factors that negatively trigger him, if the lesson does not include how racial profiling and the criminalization of Black males affect behavior?

Simply put, if the curriculum doesn't include lesson plans designed to critically analyze societal issues that Black students are likely to face and instead continues to ignore the racialized reality of Black people (by centering experiences in American life through the lens of whiteness or color-blindness), then SEL will prove ineffective at facilitating Black students' growth and emotional development within the wider context of their environment. It will also hinder their ability to effectively manage their emotions when triggered by societal ills such as racial injustice, or other issues they will likely encounter within their immediate environment and society at large. It's no secret that inequality has hindered the potential of SEL in urban schools. In 2018, the governor of the state of Illinois assembled the Emotional Intelligence Social and Emotional Learning Task Force, which issued their final report in March 2021. Among other things, they recommended that the state's SEL standards be revised due to the inequities that exist within the educational system, social injustices, and the economic struggles that impact the citizens of that state (Illinois State Board of Education 11).

As the issue of inequity within the SEL curriculum and the wider educational system gets resolved, the dynamics of student-teacher relationships and the paternalistic fixation on student behavior within urban schools have to be addressed accordingly. In order for students within urban schools to adequately learn and effectively utilize the com-

ponents of SEL, teachers will have to be retrained, not only in the equitable approach to SEL, but also in the humanizing approach to building positive relationships with their students (Legette et al. 280). Although the concept of a positive student-teacher relationship isn't defined with any specificity, ideally, it should encompass open communication and warm interactions that demonstrate to the students that the teacher genuinely cares about their overall well-being and is invested in their future success (Bakadorva and Raufelder; Legette et al. 280). The lasting impact that the teachers can leave on the hearts and minds of their students is well known. An infamous example of this is narrated in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X.* It is an exchange between Malcolm and his eighth-grade English teacher Mr. Ostrowski:

> "Malcolm, you ought to be thinking about a career. Have you given it much thought?"
>
> "Well yes sir, I've been thinking I'd like to be a lawyer."
>
> Mr. Ostrowski looked surprised . . . kind of half smiled and said, "Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us to be realistic . . . We all like you here, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a [n-gger]. A lawyer — that's no realistic goal for a [n-gger]" (X and Haley 43).

Conversations like this (substantively speaking), while representing a very dark period within American history, are emblematic of the dynamics between students and teachers. The teacher represents a source of guidance and a sounding board for dreams and aspirations of his/her students. The way in which the teacher is trained to carry out this responsibility reflects the dominant moral, cultural, political, educational, and social values of the larger society, which explains in part why Mr. Ostrowski saw nothing wrong or unprofessional with expressing such a blatantly racist sentiment to young Malcolm. The fact that the teacher felt free to say it isn't as important as how it made Malcolm feel, and the lasting impact it had on Malcolm's life. This incident illustrates the powerful, influential role that teachers play in the lives of students. To be clear, not all white teachers in urban schools are as blatantly racist as Mr. Ostrowski was, but their implicit racial biases may manifest through micro-aggressions in their grading practices, disciplinary decisions, differential perceptions, and academic placement evaluations and expectations of Black students (Legette et al. 280-81).

Currently, the method of teaching and training in the field of SEL varies from state to state (Legette et al. 281); undoubtedly, most are centered around a color-blind approach to teaching the five components of SEL (Fergus and Gregory 117). As mentioned before, such an approach ignores the reality of systemic racism, and how power and privilege sustain structural inequity. Instead of using a color-blind philosophy in the training of teachers in urban schools, an antiracist, problem-posing SEL training methodology must be developed. Such a methodology should encompass training teachers to have a critical understanding of the political, structural, and social dynamics of white supremacy, and how it functions within American society. Only then will they be able to fully recognize and problematize it within themselves and their method of teaching SEL to students within urban schools (Allen 223).

A number of scholars working to create a more equitable SEL experience for Black students attending urban schools have proposed recommendations for the social-emotional training (SET) of teachers assigned to teach within urban spaces. Among them are Kamilah B. Legette, Leoandra Onnie Rogers, and Chezare A. Warren. Their recommendations, as presented in "Humanizing Student-Teacher Relationships for Black Children," are in line with the antiracist, problem-posing training methodology mentioned above. It's important to note that empirical research is lacking to support the proposed SET of teachers within urban schools. That being said, their recommendations are tailored to encompass what the authors describe as an equity-informed Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (TSEL) model (Jagers et al. 3).

The proposed recommendations — a total of five — are partially quoted, and briefly discussed below:

1. Social Awareness

"Without an explicit focus on racism and oppression, training in the social awareness competency can perpetuate cultural deficit perceptions about individual students rather than an awareness of the systemic racism that affects the behavior of both Black and white students. Without this knowledge, teachers run the risk of inadvertently engaging in racially discriminatory practices, and thus reify inequality and oppressive racial hierarchies" (282-83).

A transformative, antiracist social-awareness training for teachers will equip them with insight into the entrenched racially discriminatory hardships that Black students must navigate both inside and outside of the classroom. Issues like racial profiling, criminalization of Black boys, racial stereotyping of Black girls, and socioeconomic discriminatory factors that impact urban communities all affect the emotional, mental, and physical health of Black students.

Furthermore, if teachers aren't trained to recognize and effectively communicate with students who may be struggling or demonstrating resistance in ways that may be perceived as rebellious or angry due to racial injustice, they run the risk of attributing these acts to some form of cultural deficit or social-emotional behavioral disorder (Lewis 259). For example, Monique Morris, founder of the National Black

> "When all is said and done, the social-emotional learning of Black students in urban schools warrants an equity-minded, antiracist approach that tailors the curriculum to the lived realities of students' racialized experiences."

> "The paternalistic, zero-tolerance behavioral enforcement policies that ushered in the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon have only served to compound emotional instability and trigger distrust and/or hostility from Black students."

Women's Justice Institute, describes how some teachers criticize Black girls for being loud or having an "attitude," but don't understand that this may signal their desire to be heard and seen in the context of gender and racial oppression (Morris).

2. Self-Awareness

"Teachers' understanding of self-awareness must include learning the self in relation to structural racism — acknowledging one's racial biases and understanding how racial biases shape emotions and behaviors towards Black students in the classroom" (283).

Self-awareness entails training teachers to critically challenge their conscious and unconscious beliefs and navigate stereotypes about Black students, which may cause them to make snap judgments about their cultural mannerisms — such as the way they speak, dress, and wear their hair (McCall et al. 4). Lack of self-awareness has proven to be a common trait among white educators who, through racial bias or cultural incompetence, end up unfairly scrutinizing Black students more so compared to their white counterparts. Such scrutiny often results in micro-aggressions, which studies show can have serious effects on a student's mental health (Smith et al.).

3. Self-Management

"The self-management competency should include training that focuses on teachers learning to attend to and regulate their emotional reactions and perceptions in the classroom, which have been shown to be racially motivated" (283).

This competency speaks to the tendency of white teachers to interpret the behavior of Black students as aggressive, disruptive, or threatening in contrast to similar behavior by white students (Henry et al.), which often results in disproportionate disciplinary measures for Blacks. For example, national data from 2013–14 show that although only 19% of preschool children are Black, they represent 47% of preschool children who receive one or more out-of-school suspensions (Fergus and Gregory 119). Such disparity speaks volumes about the need for an antiracist problem-posing SET for teachers and administrators, such as principals, who authorize disproportionate suspensions of Black students.

4. Responsible Decision-Making

"From a transformative perspective, this SEL competency should include training that focuses on teachers learning to recognize how their racialized

perceptions and emotions can shape their pedagogy and their disciplinary decisions . . ." (283).

The manner in which teachers relay information in SEL curriculum has a tremendous effect on the way students learn and utilize that information (McCall et al. 7). The same holds true for the manner in which teachers treat students. For instance, if a student is made to feel marginalized by their teacher due to perceived racial bias, the student will likely disconnect from the teacher and the curriculum altogether (Ruzek and Schenke). Often when this happens, friction between teacher and student results in disciplinary measures being enforced unfairly against Black students. If teachers were trained to identify and challenge racial biases that distort their perceptions and emotions, they would be less likely to unfairly scrutinize Black students, and more able to empathize with them and make informed decisions with their students, rather than about their students.

5. Relationship Skills

"Black students need their teachers to receive (SET) that includes how to build genuine, caring connections as well as how to demonstrate such care through advocacy for Black students — standing up for racial justice inside and outside of school . . ." (283).

As mentioned in the opening of the essay, for too long too many children in urban communities have been left to navigate trauma with little to no understanding of how to manage their emotions. For many, schools serve as a place of safety or temporary refuge from the violence, criminalization, poverty, etc. that exist in their communities. Thus, the development of trusting and healthy relationships between student and teacher is paramount if they are to benefit from an equity-informed SEL curriculum (Legette et al. 284). Equipping teachers with the skills necessary to make their students feel safe and seen — so they feel secure enough to open up about their emotional struggles — will not be possible if teachers don't sincerely care about their students' well-being. Since their Black students are engaged in an ongoing resistance against systemic racism, teachers must be among their most fervent advocates and allies in this resistance.

When all is said and done, the social-emotional learning of Black students in urban schools warrants an equity-minded, antiracist approach that tailors the curriculum to the lived realities of students' racialized experiences. The paternalistic, zero-tolerance behavioral enforcement policies that ushered in the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon have only served to compound emotional instability and trigger distrust and/or hostility from Black students. Thus, an equity-minded, antiracist SEL curriculum will necessitate an antiracist, problem-posing SET methodology for teachers. Both past and current circumstances dictate that we can't have one without the other. ▪

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Mayonnaise Avengers

Final assignment by Regina DeFrancisco
for the course, "Chemistry of Nature and Culture"

Preface by Shelby Hatch, associate professor of instruction
in the Department of Chemistry

In the fall of 2022, I taught "Chemistry of Nature and Culture" to the NPEP students at Logan. This is a liberal arts chemistry course that does not presuppose any chemistry knowledge.

I also polled the students before the class started about topics of interest to them, one of which was food. Regina wrote this piece for her final project in the class. The project included both a 10-minute presentation and a "paper" — no restrictions on the format of either (except to be creative)!

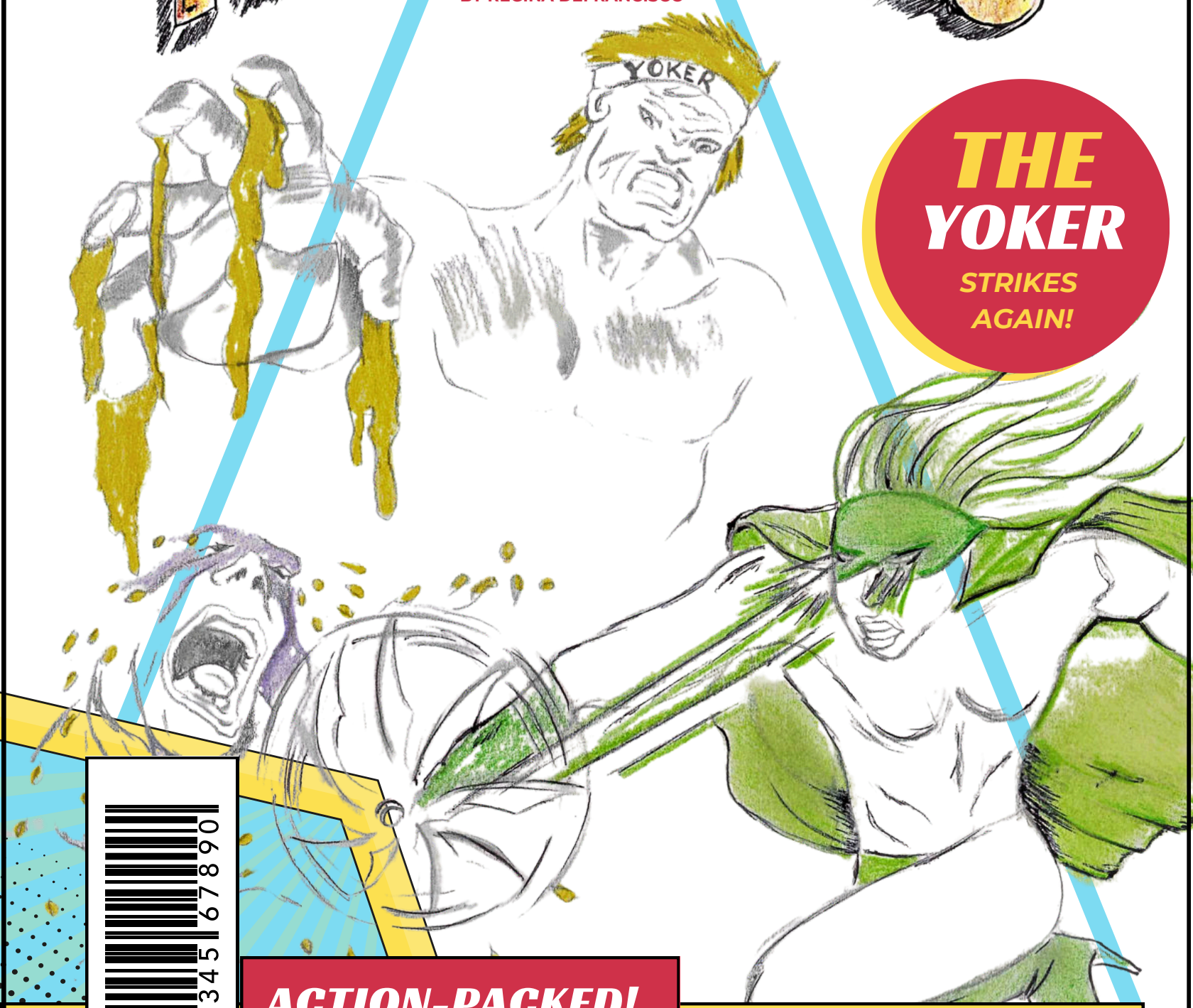
The prompt asked students to consider the following questions: Why did you choose this topic? What intrigues you about your subject? How does it work (at a chemical level)? What is its chemical structure?▪

NOV 2025
NO. 01

APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY

MAYONNAISE AVENGERS

BY REGINA DEFRANCISCO



THE YOKER STRIKES AGAIN!

ACTION-PACKED!

AN ODE TO CHEMISTRY —
AND A THRILLING ADVENTURE!

12345 67890

A CATASTROPHE HAS HAPPENED...

MAYONNAISE IS RUNNING

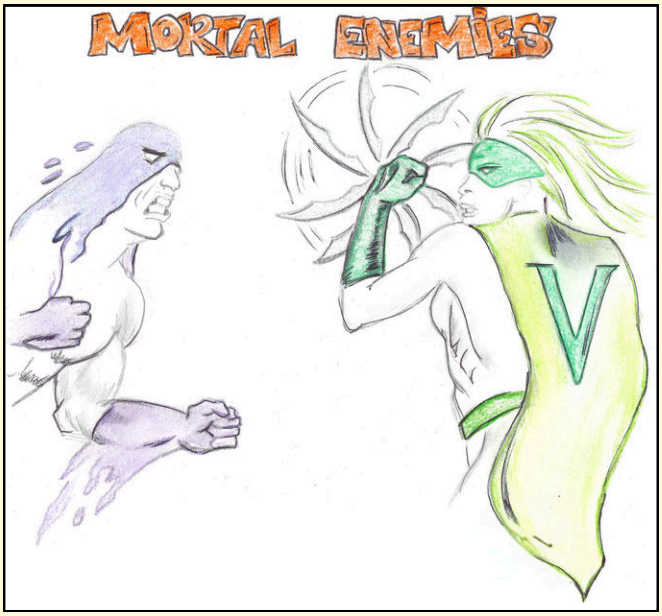
LOW!

THE WORLD **CAN'T SURVIVE** WITHOUT ITS DELICIOUS SAUCE — THEY PUT THAT *ISH* ON EVERYTHING. THE PROBLEM IS THAT THE MAIN INGREDIENTS AREN'T GETTING ALONG. VINEGAR AND THE EGG YOLK, BETTER KNOWN AS **"THE YOKER,"** GET ALONG QUITE NICELY. YOKER HAS A COUSIN WHO LIVES IN GOTHAM CITY, *MAYBE YOU'VE HEARD OF 'EM?*

IT'S OIL WHO **REFUSES** TO PLAY NICE.

HYDROPHOBIC OIL AND HYDROPHOBIC VINEGAR ARE **MORTAL ENEMIES** SWORN TO HATE EACH OTHER UNTIL THE END OF TIME.

OIL AVOIDS VINEGAR AND HER BLADES OF FURY **AT ALL COSTS**.



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Community Garden

By Juan Garnica

Adorned in thorns
Lot packed with weeds
Disheveled soil at my feet

Beautiful briar
Designed for survival
In the barren ground of captivity

Scornful glares
Forsaking my existence
Blossoming notwithstanding hostility

Enriching perennial
Yielding fruits
In the community

I
Made
Ugly.

A Thousand-Yard Stare

By Yaphet Davis

Illustration by Jason Gorham

Barricaded in by the unrelenting barriers of confinement,
In this small compartment in which I live
I can barely extend my limbs.
Losing my complexion;
Denied my visual capacity to see beyond a few feet in every direction.
I question Jehovah;
Even the mirror's reflection crowds my space, giving me feelings of claustrophobia.
Bereft of freedom, I sit in somber and silent stillness like an empty body,
With my face bearing an infinite expression of melancholy.

Staring a thousand yards into a parallel universe
Where the comforting memories of yesterday's peace and contentment are certainly
Polarized by today's painful misfortunes and tomorrow's uncertainties.

Staring a thousand yards into the distance
Where in an instant I feel the gravity
of my circumstance pulling intensely at my sanity,
trying to divest me of my humanity,
feeling like my life's journey 'til this point was all vanity.

Staring a thousand yards into the wall right in front of me
I see images of friends and family carrying on casually,
With infinite indifference to this solitary existence,
Which consists of bare subsistence and inconsistent legal assistance;
Where friendships that were once close-knit,
Despite my persistence, are now distant.
My feeble heart tormented by my own insecurities regarding my love interest.

A thousand yards I stare into the great nowhere,
The infamous abyss, an immense void
Staring attentively, deliberately injecting steroids into my own misery.
My mind wanders a thousand yards yonder
Where my sight detects a familiar emerging from the misted light.

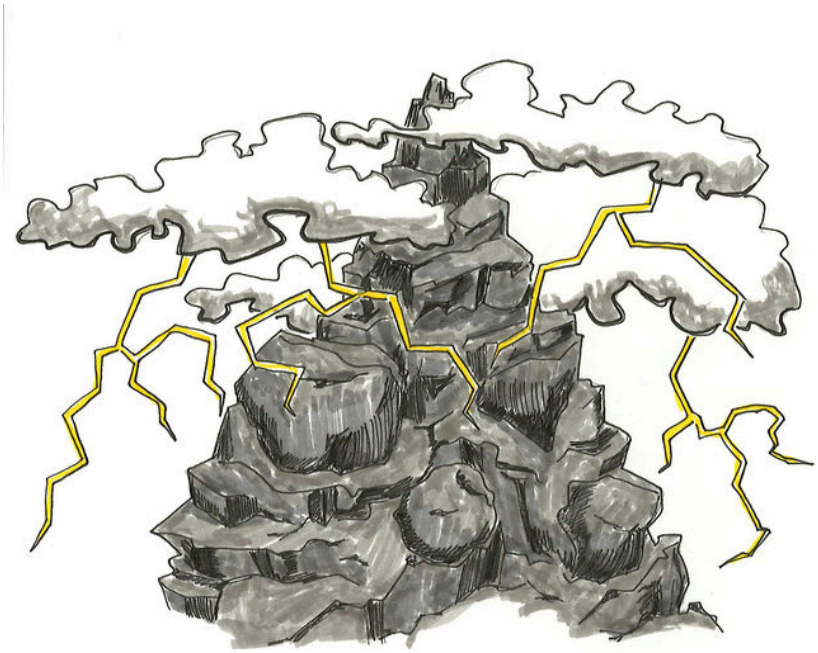
Right before my eyes appears Lady Suicide —
The Harlot,
Adorned in a scarlet negligee.
She does not walk, she glides,
And with every stride
Her hips sway in a way that is destructively seductive.
Mysterious.
And though I never take her serious,
I reach out to touch her.
Deliriously curious.

But she disappears...
Right there.
Her image dissipates into the air.
Dissolved into the infinite nowhere,
Along with everything else that was there...
Within my thousand-yard stare.

Difficulty 2.0

By Patrick Comi

Illustration by Jason Gorham



Difficulty, your presence was life-changing.
You've examined me in ways that made my heart skip a beat.
Your invasive audacity has humbled me.
Truth be told, your reach is bold,
Ever present, always searching
For a victim to annihilate with hate.
You are always lurking,
Ready to disrupt my harmony,
My happiness,
My new way of living.
Difficulty, there are no more tricks to be played
I see the cards that you've dealt.
You are always expected but no longer welcomed in my life.

Say My Name

By Latosha Howard

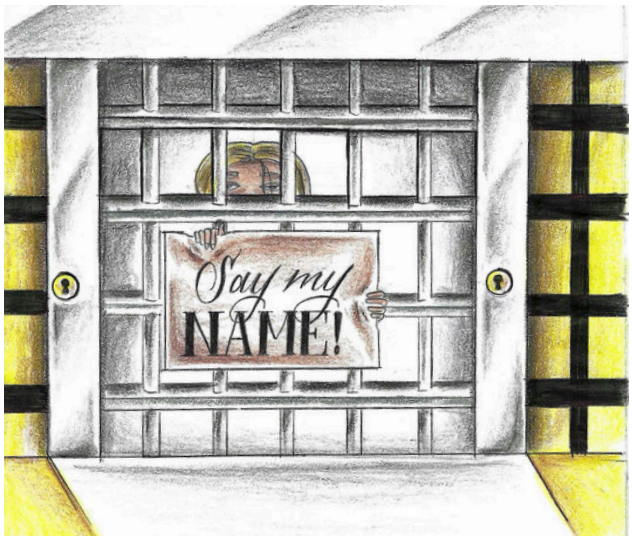
Illustration by Ariel Bueno

When we are born, the first words that come out of people's mouths are our names. We are given a name for a reason. My name and yours identify who we are.

When we're incarcerated, our name suddenly changes without our permission. We become an inmate, individual in custody, criminal, convict, prisoner, boy, girl, murderer, stupid bitch, dumb ass, felon, offender, "you," your identification number — the prison labels go on and on. These labels place us in a box so we're not recognized as humans. These labels dehumanize us so that people are OK with the mistreatment that they force upon us.

We are not a label, a thing. We are somebody. We are people and should be recognized as people. We do not accept prison labels. The labels need to stop.

Acknowledge that we are human beings. Call me by my name.



I am Howard.

I am Dixon.

I am Harris.

I am Ford-Wright.

I am White.

I am Phoenixx.

I am Ramey.

I am Samuels.

I am Dextra.

Say my name.

I Can See

by Nikolas Gacho Sr.

Illustration by Ariel Bueno

Politics,
It's a trick!
Whoever wins, takes their pick,
On who they'll trick.
They lay it on thick.
It makes me sick!
I can't believe what they say!
What they let you see is the overlay
For the underplay.
It's the game they play!

Defenders of our Constitution,
Need lessons on conflict resolution,
They should be consistent with our principles,
One nation, under God, indivisible!
The division could not be more visible,
It's despicable!
We're supposed to be amicable!

Traditional, leaders of the free world,
A free world is the objective.
Our politics have lost sight of this perspective.
We escaped religious persecution.
Ever present is a different persecution,
And few politicians question why.
It's their 9 to 5,
So, it's ride or die,
Right or wrong.
Loyalty to their cause
Lock their jaws,
Which I believe is one
Of their biggest flaws!

Be for all people — created equal!
Let go of the division
And embrace the original vision.
One nation under God, indivisible,
With liberty and justice
For all!

BIG BLACK

by Scot Miller

I am Blacker than a million midnights.
Don't look at my skin,
my darkness lies within.
My darkness is of stolen decades,
cold concrete, and lifeless steel,
blind magistrates, deaf justice, and
immovable appeals.
The innocent should not need repentance
but there is no truth in this sentence.

Darker than the motherland on a starless night,
My Blackness survived slave ships with chains too tight.
Don't judge my Blackness on my complexion.
My light skin proves the master's
Unwanted attention.

Plea Deal

by Michael Jorgensen

Author's note: This poem is inspired by "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams

So much depends
upon

admission
of guilt

whether factual
or not

the State exacts
its toll

Diasporic Blues

By Diandra Samuels

Welcome to Amerikkka.
Where anybody is able to live the American Dream....
Where anybody is afforded opportunities to prosper...
Where seeds are planted and dreams will blossom...
Except for...
My ancestors,
Whose sweat enriched the soil of capitalism,
Whose dried blood paved the road of White Supremacy...
Whose tears channel centuries of oppressed pain and anger.
Welcome to Amerikkka.
Where my roots died on the rippled waves, lost
between the coast of our motherland
and the coast of our enslavement...
Where my existence lost its value except in exchange for
green ghosts in the midst of the Atlantic,
Where my whole definition of "being" has been scrambled and entangled
with a foreign nation that hates me.
Welcome to Amerikkka.
Where my people are lost in a land that others run to for happiness...
Where dreams flourish and money grows on the same tree my ancestors
were hung from...
Where our dark past has become others' bright future...
Oh, Amerikkka!
A country that was never lost, so it could have never been found.
A country where equality is unbalanced and freedom is not free.
A country that was built by us but not for us...

These... are our Diasporic Blues.

Community News & Updates

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Sheridan Debuts Edovo, a Free Learning Platform for Incarcerated Students

A new digital platform aims to expand access to education in Illinois prisons.

By Abdul-Malik Muhammad

On May 7, 2025, Sheridan Correctional Center hosted an educational justice event introducing Edovo, a digital learning platform for incarcerated individuals that the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) has recently adopted. The event was organized by IDOC Assistant Director Alyssa Williams and Chief of Programs Jennifer Parrack as part of the department's broader effort to expand access to education behind bars.

Edovo is a nonprofit education platform that provides free tablet- and kiosk-based access to academic, vocational, and wellness content in correctional facilities. According to the organization, the platform is used in over 1,100 facilities nationwide and has reached roughly 900,000 incarcerated individuals, who have completed more than 50 million learning hours. Through the ICSolutions Edovo app, users can access courses in business, the humanities, Western history, science fiction, poetry, LGBTQ+ literature, and more, including documentaries and games for enrichment and recreation.

The platform's free access model contributed to the enthusiasm expressed by Assistant Warden of Programs Portwood, who noted that the service will help incarcerated individuals continue to learn, grow, and support one another.

AWP Portwood was one of many participants in the event, which also included Edovo staff, educators, investors, and students from NPEP.

The opening panel featured several members of the Edovo team, including Roberto, who spent 22 years incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison. During his time inside, Roberto earned a master's degree in coding. After his release, Edovo hired him — an inspiring example of the power of education and second chances.

The keynote speaker, Assistant Director Williams, described how, in 1987, the Illinois General Assembly passed legislation barring Pell Grants and state financial aid for low-income incarcerated students. She noted that, prior to that time, every prison in Illinois offered access to higher education and vocational certificates. While Pell Grants for incarcerated students were reinstated at the federal level in 2023, many prisons across the state still lack consistent educational programming. Williams emphasized that Edovo offers an additional strategy to expand access beyond what Pell and university partnerships alone can cover.

In addition to in-prison programming, Edovo also offers a reentry tool, Edovo Go, which allows users to continue their education and access past transcripts after release.

NPEP student Mohammed Salahat reflected on the changes he's seen during his incarceration: "When I came to prison 16 years ago, there weren't any nonprofit organizations offering a free education. It's very apparent how deeply people are affected by the lack of access to higher education. To hear about the opportunities Edovo will offer — for free — is a blessing."

Following the event, Edovo shared a message of appreciation on social media: "We are so grateful to the staff and residents [at] Sheridan Correctional Center in IDOC that we had a chance to meet yesterday! We learned so much and are energized to turn those conversations into action for all of our incarcerated learners and staff that we serve!"

While challenges to educational access remain widespread across the carceral system, gatherings and tools like this create space for connection, reflection, and the possibility of progress — especially when the voices of incarcerated learners are part of the conversation. ▪

“When I came to prison 16 years ago, there weren’t any nonprofit organizations offering a free education. It’s very apparent how deeply people are affected by the lack of access to higher education. To hear about the opportunities Edovo will offer — for free — is a blessing.”

– Mohammed Salahat, Cohort 5 student

Photos courtesy of Eric G. Beltran, educational facility administrator at Sheridan CC

NEWS, LETTERS, & UPDATES

TO AND FROM OUR COMMUNITY

Student Film 'Hey Hugo' Wins Best Documentary at CineYouth Film Festival

"Hey Hugo" — a short film about Hugo Ocon, a beloved father and NPEP student wrongfully convicted of a crime — won Best Documentary at this year's CineYouth Film Festival. Shot by Medill students Annie Xia and Ysa Quiballo as part of Northwestern Professor Brent Huffman's Documenting Carceral Injustice *class, the film captures Hugo's enduring spirit through the eyes of his family, who share fond memories as he awaits a hearing to reopen his case.*

CineYouth, part of the Chicago International Film Festival, celebrates filmmakers 22 and younger from around the world.

Hugo is a member of NPEP's third cohort. His most recent day in court to support his clemency bid was scheduled for early August.

Anthony Ehlers Wins Stillwater Award for Tribute to Fellow Student and Friend, Michael Broadway

Anthony Ehlers, a member of NPEP's first cohort, has been awarded a Stillwater Award for his black-and-white illustration honoring fellow student Michael Broadway, who passed away on Juneteenth 2024.

The Stillwater Awards, co-sponsored by the Society of Professional Journalists and the Prison Journalism Project, recognize excellence in prison journalism — one of the most difficult places to practice the craft. Anthony's drawing was praised by the judges as "polished," noting that his skill stood out even more because of the absence of color: "Black-and-white illustrations emphasize the skill and execution of the artist because there's no color to distract the eye."

Anthony created the piece while mourning. "I poured my pain and sadness into it," he wrote in Vol. 1, Issue 2 of the Northwestern Insider, *the issue in which the illustration was published as cover art. "He was a beautiful person, and that's what I wanted people to see... The gears are the wheels of time that keep on turning. He is gone, and the closing of Stateville is a part of his legacy."*

At a recognition ceremony, Insider *publisher Colin Hanner said: "Through his art, [Anthony] is helping others see that environment more clearly ... He is giving us all the opportunity to remember, reflect, and feel — to connect with emotions we too often push aside, but which we need deeply."*

NEWS, LETTERS, & UPDATES

TO AND FROM OUR COMMUNITY

Three NPEP Students Released This Spring and Summer

We're thrilled to share that three NPEP students have been released in recent months:

- *Falanzo Hixson, Cohort 5*
- *Orhan Ceramagic, Cohort 5*
- *Jabari Nicks, Cohort 4*

These students leave behind an indelible impact on the NPEP community, and their release brings hope and inspiration to those still working toward freedom.

To celebrate the release of Falanzo Hixson, fellow NPEP student Todd Mandoline (Cohort 2) wrote the tribute below, just two days after Falanzo's release from Sheridan Correctional Center.

Orhan Ceramagic

Jabari Nicks

Falanzo Hixson

'Buck-Wild' No More
by Todd Mandoline

Falanzo Hixson, or "Zo" as we like to call him, first stepped into the state's most dangerous maximum-security prison as a 17-year-old with the nickname "Buck-Wild" — an appropriate characterization of his youthful actions and temperament.

On the morning of April 28, 2025, he achieved a near statistical improbability. After spending 26 long years behind bars, Zo victoriously walked out of Sheridan Correctional Center a free man, with a commitment to live life to the fullest.

For almost three decades, his mother yearned to hug her son free from prison walls and razor wire. Well, Happy Mother's Day 2025, Mom! Hug him all you'd like — your vision is now a reality. Falanzo was able to keep the promise he made to her years ago: that he was determined to gain his freedom well before his 72nd birthday.

Understandably, the energy in our living unit on the day of his release was palpable. It was a shot in the arm — an infusion of hope and optimism so desperately needed for those of us with life and de facto life sentences still fighting for our own freedom.

I met "Zo" nearly 10 years ago when I first came to Stateville Correctional Center. We were members of the initial 20 men accepted into NPEP. Due to circumstances outside of his control, he was transferred to another prison, preventing him from completing his degree with Cohort 1. Yet he persevered — and to my surprise, upon my transfer to Sheridan Correctional Center at the end of 2024, "Zo" was waiting for me as a member of Cohort 5.

Reunited, I was able to bond with "Zo" over the past four months, gaining a true brother who helped me through laughter as I navigated the recent loss of my mother.

At 8 a.m. on the morning he was about to leave prison for the last time, I began to clap, celebrating this momentous occasion. Soon after, our entire wing was celebrating, causing him to yell out, "Stop, y'all! I'm about to start crying!"

Little did he know, I already had tears in my eyes out of pure joy and happiness for my brother. (It's OK, Fa-LAN-zo! Haha, let them tears flow.)

Enjoy the freedom you so painstakingly earned. I know you will make us all proud. Hug your mom for me — she deserves it. And get ready to kick it with Big Fred! Your story inspires me to keep fighting and to hopefully join you soon.

Student Films Center Incarcerated Voices at AmDocs Festival

NPEP students' stories told on the big screen for festival-goers

In late March, several powerful short documentaries created by Northwestern University students were screened at the American Documentary and Animation Film Festival (AmDocs) in Palm Springs — one of the world's top-ranked festivals for independent nonfiction filmmaking.

Produced in Northwestern University Professor Brent Huffman's documentary class, the films spotlighted the experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals connected to NPEP.

The featured films included:

- *"Dear Hillary" – Mark Dixon and Leon Fields challenge the "Super Predator" myth that shaped their teenage sentencing.*
- *"Defying The Odds" – Benard McKinley reflects on his 100-year sentence handed down for a crime he committed when he was just 16.*
- *"Hey Hugo" – Hugo Ocon and his family's experience of loss and grieving during his incarceration, as he waits for his sentence to be overturned.*
- *"Jeffery, Come Home" – Jeffery Campbell seeks legal relief after serving 24 years for a crime he maintains he didn't commit.*
- *"Until You Come Home" – Michael Ortega's wrongful incarceration and its devastating toll on his family.*

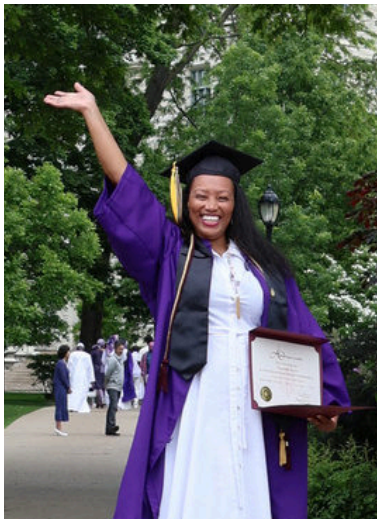
Some of the student filmmakers were in attendance, as were Professor Huffman and Yolanda Fields, the mother of Cohort 2 student Leon Fields.

The screenings drew heartfelt reactions from the attendees and underscored the power of documentary film to bring hidden stories to light.

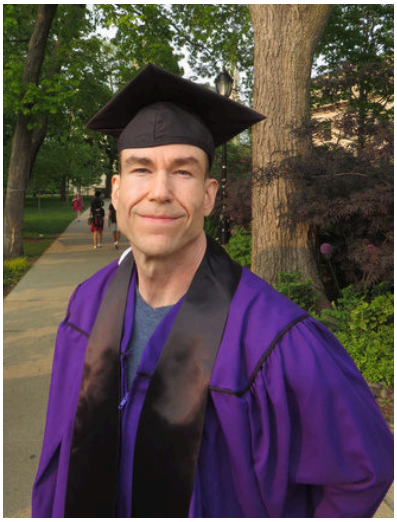
CONGRATULATIONS, GRADUATES!

A first for Northwestern University:
Former inside students don caps and gowns to celebrate their graduation on the Evanston campus

Broderick Hollins



Shawnette Green



Paul Modrowski

On Saturday, June 14, the School of Professional Studies (SPS) held its 2025 Convocation at the Ryan Fieldhouse on Northwestern's Evanston campus. For NPEP, the day marked a historic milestone: for the first time, two NPEP students — Broderick Hollins and Shawnette Green — walked the stage as free individuals. A third graduate, Paul Modrowski, was unable to attend in person because he was traveling to an internship at Yale University.

Each of these three students earned their Bachelor of Science in General Studies, a degree years in the making and hard-won through dedication, discipline, and resilience. Their presence among SPS graduates was not just symbolic — it was transformative, representing what becomes possible when education is made accessible to all, regardless of circumstances.

The moment was felt deeply across the NPEP community, honoring not only their academic achievement but the power of persistence, solidarity, and second chances.

NEWS, LETTERS, & UPDATES

TO AND FROM OUR COMMUNITY

NPEP Hosts First Annual Recognition Ceremony at Sheridan
With reporting from Fly Miller

On June 11, the gymnasium at Sheridan Correctional Center filled with applause and reflection as students, educators, and supporters gathered for NPEP's first annual recognition ceremony. Hosted by Donnell Green and kept on schedule by William "Shafiq" Peeples, the event celebrated academic achievement and the enduring strength of the community NPEP has created.

Students from all cohorts attended, joined by NPEP Director Jennifer Lackey, Deputy Director Michelle Paulsen, and Ariel Rothman from the School of Professional Studies, alongside educators, volunteers, and tutors.

Several students were inducted into Alpha Sigma Lambda, the national honor society for adult learners who demonstrate academic excellence. Students also honored their fellow students and other members of the NPEP community, including an award in courage to Professor Sheila Bedi for her ongoing advocacy and support. A powerful tribute was paid to Michael Broadway, a cornerstone of NPEP who passed away on Juneteenth 2024, recognizing his lasting legacy as a writer, leader, and inspiration.

Contributors to the Northwestern Insider *were celebrated as well, including artist Anthony Ehlers, whose award-winning illustration graced the cover of the magazine's second issue.*

More than just a recognition ceremony, the day served as a reminder of the transformative power of education, community, and mutual recognition — and the many ways in which NPEP students continue to lead, create, and uplift one another.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS: VOL. 2, ISSUE 3 "RIGHT/WRITE TO BE KNOWN"

The themed section of the next issue of the *Northwestern Insider* is "Right to be Known/Write to be Known. " You are invited to submit essays, articles, or artwork that focus on how writing and other forms of expression have helped you tell your story to your friends, family, the courts, etc.

You are also invited to submit to any of the *Insider* columns. Theme-based prompts for the columns are below. For more information on how to submit, please refer to the following page.

Spirituality Column
by William 'Shafiq' Peeples Jr.

The stress associated with incarceration is known to have deleterious and debilitating effects on justice-impacted humans. Faith and spirituality is also reported to offset carceral stress. In this issue, we want to hear from members of the NPEP community how your belief system or faith strengthens, encourages, comforts, and sustains you.

Please send your submissions to William 'Shafiq' Peeples Jr., Barbara Shwom, or Colin Hanner. We look forward to your submissions.

Motivational Column "On the Rise With Fly"
by Flynard Miller

For the upcoming issue of the Insider*, we want to know what drives you to pursue your creative passion. What motivates you to write a poem, a book, an essay — or something else entirely? What sparks you to draw, paint, sing, or play music? What compels you to keep creating?*

Submissions should be 250 words or less. Please send yours to Flynard "Fly" Miller, Barbara Shwom, or Colin Hanner.

Insider Law
by Lynn Green

Do you know of a new law, proposed legislation, or administrative policy that affects justice-impacted people or their families? Is there a policymaker or public official — such as a state senator, representative, mayor, alderperson, or IDOC administrator — you'd like to hear from in Insider Law?

Sharing these stories helps uphold the right to be known — ensuring the experiences and perspectives of justice-impacted communities are visible, understood, and part of the public record.

We also welcome other ideas or submissions that shed light on issues and laws shaping our lives, inside and out. Please send your ideas or submissions to Lynn Green, Barbara Shwom, or Colin Hanner.

Restorative Justice Column
by Abdul-Malik Muhammad

Tell a story of when you felt seen or heard. Our RJ community understands how difficult healing can be when you don't feel seen, heard, or supported. As Professor Buth has said, "We understand that the cycle of harm and violence results in unhealed wounds." By sharing a story of when you have felt seen or heard, you have the chance to tell a fuller, more humanizing story — one that resists the flat narratives too often placed upon us.

Please keep your response to 150 words or fewer. If you would like to explore this topic in more depth, you're welcome to submit a longer written piece for consideration. Please send your ideas or submissions to Abdul-Malik Muhammad, Barbara Shwom, or Colin Hanner.

CONTRIBUTE TO THE *NORTHWESTERN INSIDER*

- Submissions are open to students currently enrolled in NPEP and to NPEP alumni. Submissions should be original and created by the submitting artist or writer.
- All genres of written work and forms of art are welcome, including but not limited to poetry, short stories, essays, and visual art. In addition to submissions on the theme of the issue, we encourage a wide range of themes and topics, including personal narratives, reflections, social issues, fiction, nonfiction, work created for and inspired by NPEP classes, reflections on NPEP classes, tutor and professor spotlights, and other forms of creative expression.

Submission Format/Process

- Fill out a story or art submission form — **please ask Barbara Shwom or Colin Hanner for a blank form.**
- Submissions can be given to tutors, NPEP staff members, or *Northwestern Insider* Support Staff members (Barbara Shwom or Colin Hanner). Please **DO NOT** submit your piece to professors or other members of the academic staff.

If you have any questions, please write to the "*Northwestern Insider* Support Staff," or ask Colin Hanner or Barbara Shwom.

CONNECT WITH US:

Stay connected with the *Northwestern Insider* and the broader NPEP community through our online platforms. Explore more stories, updates, and opportunities to get involved:

- NPEP website: https://sites.northwestern.edu/npep
- *Northwestern Insider* email: northwesterninsider@northwestern.edu
- *Northwestern Insider* website: https://northwesterninsider.com
- Facebook: Northwestern Prison Education Program
- Instagram: @nuprisoneducation

Follow along for the latest from our students, upcoming events, and ways to support NPEP's mission.

Acknowledgments

Heartfelt gratitude is extended to everyone who played a part in bringing to life this issue dedicated to family and parenthood. To the writers, editors, and artists listed in the Table of Contents — your commitment to excellence through multiple rounds of revising and editing is a true reflection of the spirit of NPEP.

To the students and alumni behind the scenes who attended meetings of the magazine's Writer's Group and who organized, typed, edited, and proofread — including Patrick Comi, Christopher Greathouse, Donnell Green, Jamal Jones, and Michael Jorgensen — your dedication and attention to detail have been invaluable. These efforts, though unseen, have made a lasting impact on the quality and spirit of this publication.

We also offer thanks to the many NPEP students, volunteers, and family members who responded to the Restorative Justice prompt, reflecting on what parenthood and family mean to you and sharing family photos. You have made this issue a true community effort.

Equal gratitude is extended to the incredible Evanston campus student volunteers, including Joyce Wang, Ashley Maloney, Sela Breen, Lea Levine, Ridhima Kodali, Elizabeth Lecy, and other members of UPEP for their time and support. This issue stands as a testament to the collective talent, hard work, and commitment of the community. Thanks are extended to each individual and the roles played in making it a reality.

Thank you all!

Colin Hanner & Barbara Shwom, outside team for the *Northwestern Insider*

ABOUT THE *NORTHWESTERN INSIDER*

Founded in 2024, the *Northwestern Insider* provides a platform for NPEP students to share their voices, explore new ideas, and connect with a broad audience through essays, fiction, poetry, art, and more. Each edition showcases the diverse experiences, creativity, and reflections of students dedicated to personal and intellectual growth.

What began as a collaborative project among passionate students, mentors, and educators has become a cornerstone of the NPEP community, driven by the contributions of talented writers and artists. We are proud to build on the vision that inspired this magazine, made possible by the continued support of dedicated individuals both within and beyond the program.

The *Insider* reflects the evolving perspectives of students united in their pursuit of meaningful expression.

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