

Prisoner Express



Newsletter

Winter 2004

HELLO AND WELCOME: I hope you are well. First let me say that we have come up with a name for the program—PRISONER EXPRESS—a program made of many projects including the newsletter. This is the second mass mailing we've done for all the inmates who are taking part in our ongoing programs. The newsletter gives me a chance to share a bit about each of our projects. Sending a newsletter seems the best way to communicate. Some of you have been receiving books or sending in essays and poems for awhile, while others of you are hearing about this program for the first time. Many of you have made requests to Books Thru Bars in Ithaca, New York, and those letters have been passed on to us. However you got here, we welcome you.

MORE THOUGHTS ON THE NEWLETTER:

My biggest hopes for this newsletter is that it can be the beginning of creating community among those of you who are reading it. In my mind the biggest problem with modern life is that people don't really feel like they are a part of a group that means a lot to them. In the past, family, tribe, and nation all held more influence on people than they do today. America has always been a land where people are free to move around and establish new roots wherever they end up. The plus side of that leads to lots of folks meeting and creating a diverse culture. The downside can often be that people lose the long-term connection to particular families, neighbors or communities. I fear that in prison, while you are all living very close to one another, that you don't really think of yourselves as community, and that, like society in general, there is more competition and less cooperation. I have ideas about how we might tap into your collective strength through the sharing of your ideas with one another or through organized letter writing campaigns to improve living conditions for inmates. Let us advocate for institutions that aim and succeed in providing inmates with services that rehabilitate and skills that can be used in the "outside" so that you can avoid going back. I know these are grand ideas, but I figure let's start big and see what happens.

SURVEY ON THE LAST PAGE: Up until now, I have sent the newsletter to anyone who has contacted this program in the past 18 months. As the numbers grow, **THE MAILING LIST MUST BE UPDATED.** If you want to keep receiving this newsletter, check the box on the survey sheet and send it back when you can.

I encourage you to be involved with some of the numerous projects within the Prisoner Express program. On the last page of this newsletter is a list of all the projects. You can check off the ones you are interested in, and I will send you more information or materials for the ones you choose.

WWW.PRISONEREXPRESS.ORG: A number of you have written with questions about the website. I want to take the time to tell you my vision of it and to ask for suggestions on what you want from it. As I said in the past, you can send a 250-word profile of yourself and your interests, and it will be posted. Many of you have included pictures that you want sent back. We'll do so as soon as we enter the profiles on the website. That's part of the work that students are doing. The website is primarily to display your writings and contact information [profiles and address]. My hope is that folks will read your writings and then go to your profile page to get your address and more info about you. If you're looking for a soul mate, this might not be the place, but if you want to share ideas rather than romance, you'll probably have success hooking up with a pen pal. You're free to try for whatever you want. We'll pick and choose from your essays, poetry and artwork. We can't possibly put all your creative work up because of the quantity and time to type it, but all profiles will be entered. Hopefully, the website will be a chance for folks on the outside to learn more about incarceration in America.

AT THE END OF THE NEWSLETTER THERE IS A FORM THAT YOU NEED TO FILL OUT IF YOU WANT US TO USE YOUR WRITINGS, ETC., IN OUR PROGRAM. WE CANNOT USE NAMES, PROFILES, ARTWORK OR WRITINGS WITHOUT YOUR COMPLETION OF THIS PERMISSION FORM. I DIDN'T REALIZE THIS IN THE LAST NEWSLETTER OR I WOULD HAVE INCLUDED IT THEN.

BOOKS IN PRISON: The most popular program and also the most difficult to maintain is the sending of books to you. We are committed to maintaining that program. Many of you already know the procedure, but for those who don't, this is how we do it. Basically you send us a list of topics you are interested in, and we do the best we can at matching our collection of donated books to your requests. As the number of requests keeps increasing and the mailing cost increase, we must spread our resources out a bit. In February alone, 120 people were slated to receive books. As some of you know, we fell behind in Dec and Jan. because Kurt, who has packed many books for you, slipped on some ice and broke his ankle. [Anyone who wants to send a get better card to Kurt can send it to the Library, and I'll deliver it to him. He really cares about you.] Without him most of the book room duties fell to me, and though I really enjoy matching up the requests, the amount of time it takes made it impossible to keep up with demands. The good news is that a local school, Ithaca College, has made work-study students available to help out with the program. This should help tremendously in the book-sending program and in getting your information posted to our website. Because I'm packing books way less and giving that work over to students, I would welcome feedback about the books you receive and whether they are good choices for you.

I am always trying to think of ways to get funding so we can expand this service and keep sending good books to inmates. We raised over \$600 at a fundraiser on 2/11/05--enough money to send 120 boxes of books. Please share your ideas for fundraising with me. I could use some new ones.

If you've requested books after reading our first newsletter, and they still have not gotten to you, don't give up on us yet. The February books are mostly for you. I wish it didn't take so long to respond, but given the huge number of requests, we're doing the best we can. For those of you who have been getting books regularly, please know that this slowdown is because the number of requests has grown so much. Please share the books whenever possible. I look at each book sent in as a planted seed, sprouting and yielding fruit many times.

PEN PALS: We also have a pen pal program to encourage library patrons and others to write to you. I allow the pen pals to use the Alternatives Library address to receive their correspondence from you. This makes it easier for people to write to an inmate they don't know. Many of you are getting some letters already, and I will do my best to keep getting letter writers for you from this community. Just so you know, the folks who want to respond to your letters often choose the ones that share ideas rather than suggestions of romance.

In our last newsletter I included pen pal addresses that were given to me by inmates. Some of you have written to say that the addresses did not pan out. Please let me know which addresses were helpful or not. I've learned my lesson and will now check resources to make sure they are valid. I didn't even

stop to consider that the information might be outdated. I will verify future information sources before I list them.

COMIC BOOKS: My 2 newest ideas and the ones I'm most excited about involve comic books and keeping a yearly diary. First let me put out the idea that I would like to publish a few comic books written and drawn by inmates. This could be a great fundraising tool. I can see a number of different comic books coming out of this program. I would like to see one that would be geared to school age children, 10 and up, dealing with different stories that could keep them from getting caught up in a lifestyle that could lead to incarceration. This could be a great service you could offer the children that are growing up too fast back in the neighborhoods you and many of us come from. I also see a comic book written for an adult audience, and there, anything is possible. It would be a chance to tell whatever story you want with no censorship. Stories could be real life or fantasy. Basically I think we need 3 separate skills to do this project, 1) people who have a story they want to tell, 2) people who can illustrate theirs or someone else's story, and 3) folks with good handwriting to write the dialogue balloons and text in the story. Some of you can do 1, 2 or all 3 aspects of the project. On the survey sheet at the end of the newsletter there's a place for you to let me know if you are interested in this project. If so, I will start sending separate mailings to you so we can get started. At this point I do not want to promise financial compensation to those who participate, as I'm still struggling just to get the money together so I can keep mailing out books. So many of you ask for comic books when I mail books. Why not make our own? I have always loved comic books, superhero stuff, since I was a kid and adult underground comics as an adult.

JOURNAL PROJECT: Another writing project that interests me would be the keeping of a journal for 1 year by a number of inmates. I would send you a book where you would record your thoughts and your experiences. Every month or so you would send what you've written to me. I'll gladly copy what you wrote and send back the original to you. At the end of the year, I would probably pick 10 of the journals out and try to weave each of the stories into a book about a year in jail. As with all the projects, I'm not able to promise any financial compensation at this point. These are ideas that interest me and further the mission of educating the public about the reality of the prison experience.

PRISONER ARTWORK: We have received a collection of prisoner art. Most of it comes in the form of pictures on envelopes. Some of you really know how to dress up an envelope. We save all the artwork you send. A local high school group has mounted some of our favorite envelopes for a traveling art show. More envelope art is needed to round out the show. It is my hope to take the show to galleries, and have the price of admission be donated books. Your

artwork plus all the requests I've gotten for comic books is what got me thinking that among you, there are folks around who could create great comics. I also have the idea of a greeting card project and will have a place on the survey sheet for those interested. I will send off a separate information packet for those who want to get involved. I hope we can sell the cards to raise book postage money. Please know that if you use popular characters that their images are copyrighted. Pictures of Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny or any other comic book characters cannot be used on a greeting card we sell. You have to use original characters. Check the form in the back, and I'll let you know more. I love receiving your artwork and hope you keep sending your drawings whether you want to participate in the greeting card program or not.

ORIGAMI (JAPANESE PAPER FOLDING): Another project I'm thinking about includes sending out origami instructions [Japanese Paper Folding]. With these instructions and paper you can make all sorts of complicated paper objects. This is a separate project and I will ask you to check this column if you want instructions. I thought all the participants could make doves or other animals, sign it, and we could hang your work as a giant mobile. It could be a silent testimony to the energy of the men and women who are incarcerated.

JUGGLING: I could also send anyone who is interested, instructions on learning how to juggle. I was laid up for awhile years ago, and because I couldn't do much else, I learned to juggle. I can do all sorts of tricks with 3 or 4 objects. I've since taught many others to juggle. It's easy, and all you need are some balled up socks or other objects to learn. It's a great way to improve your hand eye coordination, and it's something you could do even on lockdown. It's a fun way to challenge yourself, and it is easy to monitor your progress. I've never taught by mail, but if some of you are interested, I will put the instructions down on paper and start teaching.

WRITING: Besides telling you about this program, I use this newsletter to share some of the writings and artwork submitted by inmates. The more of your letters I read, the more convinced I am that inmates have a voice that needs to be heard. This program is about sending information to you and hearing and sharing with the free world what you have to say. I read in so many letters that the boredom and lack of stimulation many feel behind bars can be hard on the mind and emotions. I'm offering some ideas of how you might stay creatively engaged in life while behind bars. That is a tall order, and I hope some of you might tell your strategies for maintaining balance, health and positiveness while dealing with incarceration.

WRITING AND TOPICS: I have been suggesting topics every 2 months for our essay writing program. Inmates who care to participate write whatever they want on the topic. Everyone who writes on a topic,

gets a copy of what everyone else wrote on the same theme. The previous topic was "My Family". The current topic is "Fitting In." A few of the entries are included with this newsletter. I'd like to start suggesting themes on a monthly rather than bimonthly basis so participants could receive a collection every month. You can find a list of topics on page 12 of this the newsletter. Feel free to suggest topics of your own. You are closer to what is important to you and other inmates and may have suggestions I'd never dream of. Some of you write good letters to me and state that you don't know how to write an essay. Maybe it's the word essay that throws you off. All I'm looking for are your thoughts on a topic. There is no right or wrong answer, just what you think. Even if you write a few lines about the subject, I will send you what everyone else writes. It's a great way to get mail and see how others are coping with the daily grind. These do not need to be masterpieces. I hope your thoughts and words can touch and inspire each other and those in the "free world."

Many of you have chosen your own subjects for essays. Some of those are in this newsletter. Once online, all your essays will be included on www.prisonexpress.org our website for inmates—coming soon, hopefully before you read the next newsletter.

I'm happy to share some of the theme writings I've received from inmates these past months. Space allows me to choose only a few representative samples starting with **MY FAMILY**. Some of the writings are parts of longer pieces, while others are the entire piece. So many of the essays are inspirational that it is very hard to choose the ones to reprint in this newsletter. Even though some of them are sad, they touch our common humanity and inspire me to reflect on my own situation.

MY FAMILY

As I sit here surrounded by unpainted walls of concrete and steel, the theme "My Family" leaves me with little to dwell on. When I grew up in the fifties, our family was still living in a house without any conveniences: no plumbing, running water, or electricity. In certain ways, we were never without because we found a way to pull through. Back then families were usually large and we were no exception. There were twelve of us in our family.

In the summer there were certain chores we were supposed to do around the house. We helped to plant the garden, can the food, and whatever was needed to save a dollar. Having no running water, we heated water outside and took baths in a number 10 tub. In winter we bathed in the kitchen in the same old tub. There was no such thing as a washer or dryer. The laundry was done outside in the wash tub and hung out to dry on a clothes line. In the summer we were not allowed to wear our shoes. They were put away so that we did not wear them out.

My Mom and Dad always found a way to put food in the table, even during the big holidays. Even at Christmas we had at least one present. Finally as I got older, things I saw when I was younger seemed to not

be enough. I saw other kids with money for sodas and candy. This led me to doing petty little crimes, which eventually landed me in court. From that day onward, I never returned to my family. I spent my youth growing up in foster homes until I went into the service, so it's really hard for me to visualize or even think about a family atmosphere. And now today the family unit even in the best of families seems to be nonexistent. I don't know why, but families seem to be smaller, better off, and the children have all the necessities of childhood.

--Donald R. Dickson

I WAS BORN IN 1985. That was the year I was born into this prison life. Twenty years old without a clue of what was going on, leaving my biological family behind. Seeing inmates work by the side of the road in their whites as a little boy excited me. I would always wave at them until we were out of sight, later asking my mama, "why was them men working on the side of the road?" She said because they had chosen to leave their family behind by participating in criminal activity, choosing a life that would forever scar them in their way of living from then on.

After the Bluebird pulled up to my destination D-Unit, I entered the building. The hallway was dark. Inmates were walking around with their boxers and bandanas on. This was my new home, my family. Let me give you a little narration about my family. It's one of the most notorious and richest organized families in the United States. My first day went smooth. I was getting settled into my room with one of my brothers, whose name was Spook. The next day I had to go have a conference with the warden, who they call my father. He instructed me that I would be working in the field and what I can and cannot do in his domain. By the time that was over, it was time for lunch, which was steak, corn, potato, and gravy with real Kool-Aid.

Leaving there and going back to my pod, not knowing it was time to be tested, in which a dude called me out to the square where we had to fight. It wasn't a problem with me; I was a boxer for two years in Alvin, TX. It's just that I only weigh 150 lbs. and because of the big weight difference (he was 230 lbs.) the rule was set for no wrestling, just fighting. My 150-pound frame against his 230-pound frame left him looking like Raggedy Ann. The fight was over when the law looked in and said, "break it up or go to lock up." That was when Spook came up to me, pulled me to the side, and asked me, "Where you from?" He also offered me some toilet paper for my cut eye. I told him I was from Houston and he said he was from Dallas and that I had heart. That night we kicked until morning, drinking coffee, he lacing me up and giving me the game. The next morning while taking a shower, I saw two people from another family get stabbed to death. I was in shock and couldn't move. People were running everywhere, then I felt someone pull me by the arm. It was Spook. There wasn't any work that day --and nothing else, for that matter. We stayed locked down for 90 days. Besides the peanut butter sandwich they gave us, my homeboy, my best friend, Spook, would cook up a spread that was

mackerel, soups, and mayo mixed together to make a sandwich spread. Let me interpret homeboy for you, 'cause a lot of people misinterpret homeboy for the meaning of someone from the same neighborhood. It doesn't matter where you come from, a real homeboy is someone you would fight with, die with, cry with, and make sure he isn't doing without because he would do the same for you, not jeopardize one's life in some stupid situation.

Well I haven't heard from my biological family, nor have I seen them. I've written them several letters pertaining to my well-being and designation. I was born and raised in Houston, TX and later on moved to Alvin, TX where I grew up with just a mother who raised four boys and one girl. I'm the baby boy. We were taught to treat people the way we wanted to be treated, no matter what color their skin. "Yes, sir" and "no, sir" to our elders. It was hard for my mother raising five kids on her own, but she never gave up. She would cry a lot, and I would always ask her, "Mama, why you crying?" She would hug me tight and say, "Mama be alright baby, sometime Mama gets tired. Come on, lets go cook some hot water cornbread." Sometimes hot water cornbread would be the only thing we'd eat, and that hot water cornbread sometimes tasted like cake. Christmas was just like any other day because we didn't have toys like the other kids. Our Christmas was eating a Christmas meal together that some people brought Mama. They were from a church, and I call them the Church People. (Bless their soul) These were white people back in 1970 in Alvin, TX. Mama was a firm believer in God "and me too." Mama would always make us say our prayers before bed, and learn the 23 psalms to say in Church,

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still water. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness or His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

That would make Mama proud, seeing us stand up and recite the 23rd psalm without reading it from the Bible. You could see it all over her face. After Church we would be rewarded, by going to the store to buy candy.

Mail call was called out and I heard my name. It was Mama, telling me how much she missed me and it's not the same without me. That she was getting too old to write, but she sent me \$50, hurry home, and take care. Hearing from Mama was like adding 10 years to my life. Knowing she was doing fine put a smile on my face and a sparkler in my day. I didn't know the importance of a letter until that day. I must have reread it a hundred times.

Well, we were finally let up off of lockdown and were able to eat a hot meal and go to the

commissary. That night it was a big chain, people being shipped to other units. Spook was in on it, not going to another unit, but going home to his biological family. So I've learned through the years of experience that the meaning of family is sticking together, unity, and having love for one another. I didn't have much as a child or too many opportunities as a grown-up, but I was blessed with the most precious jewel of all. I was blessed with a life to learn the meaning of a true family.

I dedicate this story to my best friend, Spook, who saved my life.

--Stevie D. a.k.a. Henry Stephens

("excerpt")

. . . I want to say a few words to some other families while I have the chance here. They are the people that I think about every day. I'm talking about the families of the men and women I killed and injured the night I committed my crime. It's times of the year such as this that have to be especially hard for some of them. (I do realize what I have taken from and done to your lives. The physical and emotional scars my actions have caused you and your loved ones. You don't know how honest to God, truly sorry I am for what I did and the pain I've created in your lives. Some of you may never forgive me and I don't blame you. I'm not able to forgive myself. If you can take any lasting comfort from knowing that the first and last thoughts I have every day are of you, your families, and the people I killed. I willingly accept that burden as part of the price I owe to you for what I did. I pray for your peace of heart and I pray for your peace of mind. I am very sorry.)

Please be kind to one another and remember that your family and the love you share with them are the only things in this world that are really important. God bless you all

--Kenneth J. French

I HAVE A FAMILY of 11 brothers and sisters. Now, in this family of mine I'm second to the youngest. I love everyone in my family. This is not to say that I love everything that they say or do... that's what's so great about family. They love you no matter what, through thick and thin. Some may be hard on you because they see the good in you that you don't, but having a family is like having 11 friends. Eleven very good friends who you can always count on to let you know you are out of line or that you're wrong when you think you're right.

You can always count on your family when you are down and out because someone will pick you up, dust you off, and put you on the right path. But most of all, it is the love and understanding I get from me family while doing this time. "You see, my family is also doing this time with me in the mental sense of the form." They also keep me focused and thinking positive thoughts. They alone keep me from going crazy in this madhouse they call a prison system.

--Timothy Jennings

("excerpt")

. . . Sometimes life deals situations that cause a family like mine to be split up in order for all of us to get the love that's needed to grow. During those years of growing, we've all become strangers to one another. All the pain and hurt that's been felt over the years from wondering why we're not a family builds a wall. Then when some contact is made resentment starts to form because the feeling is, it was better not to know. I'd say my family is the perfect example of a family structure totally fragmented. I sit here thinking that we never should've been separated. But had that happened, those of us who are doing well might not be doing well. All in all, I still have love for all my brothers and sisters, even when they don't have love for me. I write them even though they don't write back. I'm pretty sure that all of this goes back with the after-effects of a family that is no more. Now we're trees in a forest struggling for sunlight.

--Willie E. Winston

MY FAMILY, when I think of them, which is often, I ask myself questions. Some of them I can answer some I cannot; others are a blur of confusion. All at the same time some of the answers I have are nightmares and others comforting. When I think of my family I think of myself, everything I was, I am, and hope to be. I look in the mirror and see so many missing elements, like a sentence without the adjectives. Where is my father? Is he alive? Why is my mother the detached, sadistic person that she is? Where are my relatives, my uncles, aunts, cousins that I don't know? A whole family I do not know. More blanks, more mystery. Darker and deeper the hole looks. It's a void I cannot fill.

I know I'm not the only one who's suffered, but when will it end? In my eternal torture or my eternal paradise will I take this baggage, this burden to exist as my slave master or my infinite playmate? In all of this madness I have been good at one thing: making them all suffer. In my victimization of myself, in my rationalization of my ignorance, violence, laziness, and lack of ethics I judged myself. In that judgment I became my own victim and in this victimization I lost something: that little boy who wanted to be an astronaut. And that little boy who saw the world as a magnificent place, who loved, and loved to be loved. My ignorance has been all too good to me, and my judgments and rationalizations have driven me to the point of insane violence and delusional rationalization. Inside all of this I made my family my victims and my enemies. How can I make amends for such trespasses? There is no just retribution or any owed for all involved.

I've learned a valuable truth at 30 years of age: we are all victims of this world in many ways. There are none who suffer not. My family, a bunch of strangers who are victims like me. This reality has helped me to forgive them and forgive myself for what they did not provide for me and for what I could not provide for them. I have grown and have children now. They are my family. There is nothing more I want in this universe than their love, respect, and admiration. I

once was a man with pride, pride that was my best deceiver and blinded me all too well. I no longer have pride, that mechanism that assisted me in utter self-destruction. I once was a man who called total strangers, my peers, family. I lived many days, years satisfying ignorant ideas for acceptance of others. Not anymore. I found myself standing at the bottom of an abyss. It manifested through each action and decision I made in my life. In that darkness I found insecurity so intense, so real that it was tangible even to the lungs.

One day I woke up. I don't know how or when or what exactly did it. Maybe it was a combination of events that were/are destined to happen. Whatever force or energy or thought that slapped me silly and turned the lights on. All I saw was a single vision: life, death, and family. Family from the beginning, in between, and in and after death. My family is in my very existence, in my brain, my skin, my organs, my blood, my face, my soul. When I look at myself I imagine a thousand thousand generations of people who have all led up to me, and a thousand thousand who will come from me. All those behind me, those in front of me are all me... one single soul. My children are me, and forever that will continue in their children's children, and theirs, and theirs. My family, I can only pray will forgive me as I have forgiven them. Most of all they need to forgive themselves, and stop living as meaningless judgments and assumptions that are only in their reality and conscious thoughts.

My family, that's quite a subject. I love them even though I don't know them and hope I can be to my kids what they never were to me. My family, sheep with no shepherd... lost, wandering about. Maybe someday, God willing, we'll all bump into each other. My family, they're all strangers to me. Whether that's good or bad, I can't answer. There are so many mysteries and things in this universe I do not know, but one thing I yearn to know is them, and them me, simply because they are my family.

--Bruce Large III

MY FAMILY consists of over 200 addicts that are desperately working to alleviate the pain of their addiction.

My family is caring, they show me this by bringing me awareness on undesirable behaviors I may display and correcting me.

My family is there for me whenever I need a sounding board so I can clean my gut and let go some of the things that keep me sick.

My family is very protective of my feelings and is careful not to hurt them intentionally.

My family understands the pain I've been through and can relate to me because they've all been through the same situations.

My family is my strongest support in my recovery to sobriety, keeping it real and calling me on my stuff when I refuse to look at it.

My family sticks together when it comes to fighting our disease of addiction. We motivate each other

to press on, encouraging each other not to give up.

My family is 200 men of Gateway Therapeutic Community who seek change. We help each other to change and I love my family, because I know my family loves me.

Maurice Ervin

IT HAS TAKEN ME 27 YEARS to figure out what family really means to me. I used to think it was my friends who used to stick by me, and party with me all the time. I haven't heard from them since I have been in prison all these years. They left me and I truly realize, they don't care what happens to me, just as long as it's not them. That's not family to me!

How easily I was forgotten by my so-called friends. Then in my heart, feeling all alone and needing someone, I searched out for those who would love me as I am. I found the gangs in prison. I found guys who were sticking together, helping each other out, and telling each other, "I love ya, bro." How easily that word would come to their lips when getting something they wanted out of each other. When using each other and manipulating each other, it was always, "I love ya, bro." From the outside looking in, it seemed like they wouldn't let anything come between them or cause dissention amongst them. So I naturally fell in with them like the sucker I was then. I soon realized that they didn't love me, they didn't even hardly care for me. I was just around to be spent for them and to let them use me however they saw necessary. That has led me to this cell I sit in for 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I haven't heard from any of them since I been here. What a fool I was!

Out of my last act of desperation I wrote my brother and his family. I told them I'm sorry for making them ashamed of me and for disgracing them. I didn't expect a response because in my sick mind I was thinking that they were tired of me. Not so. They gladly wrote me, and we still stay in touch on a regular basis today. They tell me they care and love me, and can't wait for me to get out and come home. They forgave me for my past actions and want to help me make a better future for myself. Before I thought or realized it, I had finally found my family.

--Anonymous

I KNOW ABOUT MY FAMILY, but I don't really know them. I have spent most of my life away from my family, and we don't communicate much. A pariah, I am an outsider looking in on them. They seem to prefer it that way, and I have come to accept it as my lot in life. As sad and lonely as it makes me feel, it has made me strong and prepared me well for the isolation I experience in prison.

If I had to choose a single word description of my family it would have to be: unconventional. Actually, I straddle two distinct families, and I don't feel like a part of either one. My parents divorced when I was very young. Their first and only child, I am the only one to come out of their union. Both of them remarried, and each of them had more children with their new spouses. Consequently, I have one family

with a mother, a stepfather, and two half- sisters; and another family with a father, a stepmother, a half-brother and a half- sister. My father divorced his second wife, making her my ex- stepmother, and recently married his third wife. I don't even know what to call her.

When my parents divorced I lived with my mother. It was just the two of us until she met the man who would become my stepfather. Once they married we all lived together. Over the following four years my mother gave birth to two daughters, and I became a constant reminder of my father and of my mother's unhappy past with him. My stepfather did not like me, and he made that very clear to me by treating me like an imposition. He cherished his own children, but he found it difficult to simply tolerate me. Social workers took me away from my mother's home to protect me from abuse, and I was placed into a foster home. The Court decided the abuse was too brutal to ever allow me to return home, and made me a "Ward of the Court".

Around the same time my mother had remarried, my father married his second wife. Together, they had a son and a daughter. I hardly saw my father: a weekend around Christmas time was the norm. My parents hated each other. They will always hate each other. They would verbally abash each other for my edification, telling me how awful the other one was, as if trying to win me over while trying to make me hate the other. I loved them both and I never took sides. My mother took that especially hard, like I had betrayed and rejected her by not hating my father. My father didn't seem to mind that I wouldn't take sides. I think he just wanted to use me to hurt my mother. It worked.

After the social workers had taken me away from my mother and stepfather and put me into a foster home, I was bounced around to several different foster homes. When I was eleven years old my grandparents, my father's parents, took me into their home thinking it better for me to live with them than with strangers in a foster home. My mother hated my father's parents almost as much as she hated my father. Spiteful, she objected in court to me living with my father's parents, and she forced social services to remove me from their home. Her intention was to have me placed back into foster care, but her plan backfired. My father had agreed to take me in. A social worker gave me the choice between living with my father or living in foster care. I was more than happy to go and live with my father and his family.

Within eight months social workers took me away from my father's family; again, to protect me from abuse. I was placed in a shelter care home, temporarily, and then I was placed in a group home. The Court deemed both of my families' homes unsafe for me, and I was made a permanent Ward of the Court. It was like I had dropped off of the face of the planet. None of my family members came to visit me. Nobody called me. Nobody so much as wrote me a letter. I understood: they didn't want me. I grew up angry after that, fighting, rebelling against the authority, and getting into a lot of trouble. I was put

into juvenile detention camps, boot camps, and more group homes until I turned eighteen.

On my eighteenth birthday I was legally an adult, and I had to appear in court to be cut loose from the system. My mother didn't come to the hearing, but my father showed up to ensure that he no longer had to pay the county for my care. I had nowhere to go and I wound up homeless, staying over at the homes of high school friends for a few days at a time, like a drifter. Eventually I wore out my welcome, and I found myself living on the streets. I started drinking, heavily. One night, fifty-two days after my eighteenth birthday, I was involved in a drunken fist -fight with another homeless man. He was severely injured. I was arrested for hurting him, and put in jail. He died nearly three months later, allegedly from a brain injury that prosecutors claimed I had caused. I was convicted of second degree murder, and sentenced to fifteen years to life in prison.

I haven't seen any of my family members in over a decade, and I haven't seen my mother or her family since I was a child. I write letters to them once in a while. Nobody writes back. My mother contacted me a few years ago and gave me her phone number. I call her on occasion, but I don't really have much to say to her. She does most of the talking. She tells me about her family, about what is going on in their lives. I listen, an outsider looking in, and wish I could be an insider. I straddle two families. I know about them, but I don't really know them.

--Zachariah Chiaia

HIGH SCHOOL SWEETHEARTS, love at first sight, that magical attraction where a man and a woman twain. They come together and learn each other through the concept of courtship. Eventually, they consolidate the ceremony with marriage. The consummation begins and the consequence is a child. Forming the budding of a family.

An idea: the people in that family travel one path with proper role modeling and healthy boundaries with altruism as its heartbeat. The family I grew up in was elusive on all those points. We were five selfish people going five different directions with little regard to the feelings of others. I think all of us possessed the tame type of brain the ol' doc put in Frankenstein, the label was ABBY-NORMAL on the jar.

I am the oldest of three boys and our parents literally came up from absolute zero. They worked hard and made sure we had everything we needed. They taught us right from wrong. And struggled and loved as I'm sure most parents do. There was simply no sense of unity. We would come together at supper time then scatter like a covey of quail.

Eventually, I came to prison just prior to my 21st birthday, I'm 47 now. And I have been incarcerated most of my adult life. Prison is tough especially back in the 70's, for a young white male. I was in prison about six years and during that time I usually walked around sporting at least one black eye from fighting. Every week went by with not less than three fights. I can still fight good but back then I

weighted 225 lbs. and the tough guys would try me on for size. There is no shortage of tough guys.

One afternoon three guys jumped me and tried to cut my face off using a box cutter razor knife. I was lucky they only got half of my face cut off because I had two shanks (homemade knives) myself. It was a particularly bloody afternoon. From the grading system of prison, I won the fight. Unknowingly, there was a group of guys that had been watching me for about a year. A few days after I got my face sewed up one of them came to call on me. The story the dude laid down was a romance to my ears. He guaranteed that the violence against my person would end. And I would be respected and feared. The violence didn't stop, it turned the corner, and shifted into high gear. But I was respected and feared because the gang became my family. Talk about ABBY-NORMAL.

Anyone who dared to get out of line was dealt with great harshness. We had our 25-cent Tough Guy masks on all the time. And when we needed, we would pull out of 50-cent gorilla suits and mark territory with the fear and blood of others. All the years went by and we would say who was and who was not worthy of our attention or attitude adjustments.

My family homeboys and I would run around helping ourselves to other people with violence and take their property then slap each other on the back laughing and congratulating each other for taking advantage of another weak character. Because we thought we were the power and we were the ones who said who was ok and all right and who was less than weak. They were prey and we were predators.

For years I felt that the dudes in here that read and talked the Bible and prayed and went to church did it for one reason - protection. I always thought they were doing the Christian thing so they wouldn't be held responsible for their crime or another weakness they may have. In fact, I viewed Christianity as weak and fake. I even persecuted many of them because of their perceived weakness, when necessary.

I became a very evil and looming presence for 26 years in this place we call prison. For 20 years I played. "The Game," "In Family." All these years have been fake, as fake as the tricks of a magician. The Family Game was entertaining or so I thought. It was a way to do time and not deal with my own shortcomings. Fake, all of it, everything in prison is fake... our tough guy masks, our gorilla suit attitudes. We came in here beating each other up, some even lose their lives and for what? To prove something? That maybe I'm better or badder or less fearful than the next dude? ABBY-NORMAL for real!

A little more than 18 months ago, security finally placed me in Administrative Segregation. They labeled me a gang member literally too dangerous to live in the General Population. There it was, I finally made it to the bottom of the bottom. Now I was worse than the worst. Short of possible parole or the end of a man's sentence, there is no way out.

Not being able to move around and confined to my cell 23 hours per day with 1 hour recreation time (sometimes) weighed heavy on my emotions and mental strength. I couldn't sleep on night so I was listening to a story on the radio about a guy who was down on his luck and had problems on top of problems. I related to the story in many ways. The parallels were unreal. At the end of the show I realized it was a Christian program from a mission in Chicago.

That's when it hit me - that the one thing I have always viewed as fake wasn't fake at all. It was real: Christians, the Bible, God, all of them real and the "Family Game" was really fake. Overwhelmed with emotion, I asked God to "Help me." That's all I could say. But the next three days I told God all about it. I poured it out to Him and what an awful wreck I had made of things.

I started reading my Bible some, even started a Bible Study and prayed when I went to bed. After all, I needed something to do with all this extra time on my hands. What I was really doing was "Hustling Jesus" trying to get past some uncomfortable feelings to an ugly past.

I held onto my gang ties and one day I read about serving two masters in my Bible. Then I didn't think much about it. But a few days later that thought kept coming to mind, time after time, like Chinese water torture. I remember audibly saying aloud, "Ok God, I hear ya, if You want me out of the gang then you are going to have to take me out." Immediately "Ok" was in my mind and the serving two masters thought was gone.

At that time I didn't know it but what I did was enter into a covenant with God. One that He honored too. In family I was always a bit more vocal than I should have been. And I got into an argument with the rank 'cause I wouldn't help him lie on another member. It was decided how I, after 20 years of service, was no longer worthy of being a member. I was shocked, angry, and a lot of other things, but my family ties were severed.

Mad, I said these dudes are doing me wrong. Then the memory of the agreement God made with me came to mind. God gave me an out - not one I would have chosen because it dishonored me in my mind. You see, I really was Hustling Jesus but God is true to His Word. That's how I know he isn't fake. God ripped me right out of my ABBY-NORMAL family and made me part of HIS ETERNAL FAMILY. That is when I realized I had weakness confused with meekness.

I always heard you better be careful what you pray for because you just might get it. I traded hate for love. And it's a sense of really belonging and a love so beautiful I cannot turn away. The transition from hate to love has not been easy, but all along the way I have experienced things I can't explain. I've had people send me books and talk about me over the radio. One lady even wrote a long poem about me. It's going to be published in her next book with some of my own poems. I've had another guy dedicate songs to me over the radio. It goes on and on. I can hardly

believe the sincere warmth and love people are bestowing to me because God kept His word to me.

No - if you are asking the question. I'm not Hustling Jesus anymore. I'm totally sold out to the Lamb of God and my past no longer matters; my slate is clean and I'm grateful. I belong to the REAL ETERNAL FAMILY - God's family. I have God and people who believe in me, trust me, and will never leave me or forsake me. What a Family, one that's chock-full of altruism. Yes it's truly a love so beautiful I cannot turn away. Come and join me, you won't regret it. I promise.

--Silent

Another theme was **2ND CHANCES**. You submitted so much good writing that it was hard to choose.

IN THE WINTER OF '95 I CAME TO PRISON. The week I was locked up, I had gotten into a bar fight over a girl. The guy I fought with was a really good friend of mine at the time.

Over the years when I talked to him on the telephone, I never said I was sorry for the shit I did that day.

When I came up for parole, I went home and I asked around for my friend. I found out that he had died on me and I just hope he's looking down on me.

I believed I deserved a 2nd chance with our friendship, but my actions prevented me from being there. Now I go into every disagreement with the idea that we all make mistakes, some worse than others. Knowing this and from my experience, I took it upon myself in my friend's memory to give people a 2nd chance, and not just write them off.

I know he would have done this for me.

--Teddy Leslie

WE ALL SIT AROUND and visualize what we will do if granted a second chance. One thing that I have to make myself do is look at all of my mistakes in the first chance that I was granted. Once I had evaluated the "do's" and "don'ts," I finally came up with a goal that I have in mind.

In my first chance I made promises and even tried making a deal with God in order to be released early. I took up jailhouse religion, fooling no one except myself. I would have done anything to get a taste of that freedom again without giving it a second thought. To escape the pain and agony of separation from friends and family, I would say anything. For me a real evaluation of self has brought to me the realization that being given a second chance means a totally new lifestyle, perhaps in an area surrounded by strange faces. Being given a second chance means setting goals - both long range and short range. It means disciplining the self, and keeping it in a harness. It is the realization that it is past time to grow up and become a man. It is taming the wild beast inside of me that occasionally takes control and breaks all rules and laws, not caring who it hurts during the process.

With a second chance I can gladly say: I have come to know the true me, and given this

chance, I can be the Randall that I need to be. I can never right all of my wrongs, but I can make the right choices and decisions.

--Randall Howell #812183

THERE'S SO MUCH TO LIFE out there with so many directions to travel. My life has been filled with many opportunities that I've wasted. My family, education, and friends have all been neglected for my drug use. I've been to prison three times, so is this really my second chance, my third, or my fourth? I say a second chance is given when a person's mind has totally changed. Now, I've been given a second chance at living. What will I do with this chance that's so different from years past?

I was born into a family where there were always a number of relatives around. I never lacked for the strength and feeling of family being there for me. This gave me a sense of belonging, of never being alone. As time passed, I grew away from my family, not just physically, but also emotionally. I finally withdrew all contact with my relatives, rarely even talking to my mom.

School was a joy for me as I was growing up. My mind has always been like a sponge, absorbing all the information it received. There are a variety of subjects with never-ending possibilities to learn about life and the people within it. I let this opportunity pass by when I quit high school right before graduation.

I believe that our friends share a part in influencing the way we live our lives. Yet, each one of us is responsible for the direction in life we take. I've had such a wide selection of friends, but when I started using drugs I avoided my law-abiding friends and leaned towards the other drug users and drug dealers.

As the years pass and I grow older, I can look back and see many things I wish I'd done differently. I can't change any of the past, but I can change what I do with the future.

I'm steadily rebuilding my relationship with my family. I take the time to write letters to some of my family members and plan on adding other members to the list. While nothing can erase the past, I feel that the time and effort I put into repairing my relationships with family is important and worth every bit of effort taken. There's still a distance between me and my two daughters, but I'm working on closing that distance as well. Our relationship will never be the same, but with patience and love our interactions as mother and daughter will thrive and endure.

Fortunately, I've been able to further my education while I've been incarcerated. I've gotten a G.E.D., taken college courses, and have a grade point average of 3.9. Not only have I received certification as a Heavy Equipment Operator on a bulldozer, but I've nearly completed my Associates in Graphic Arts. I've been able to open my mind to learning once again.

Corresponding through the mail with others has allowed me to meet and become friends with people who support my success in living life. I now lean more to being friends with those who obey the

laws given by society. These people have enriched my life and taught me more about compassion, honesty, and the meaning of friendship.

The days ahead look so much brighter for me. I look forward to the successes as well as the disappointments I'll receive. I plan on taking a trip to my hometown soon after my release. I'll become reacquainted with my family, my grandmother, aunts, uncles, and cousins. They have never given up on me and I want to let them know that even when I was gone, the memories of their love have always been with me.

I would like to start a career in either the import/export business or the travel industry. To support this ambition, I'll be taking more college courses. There are a wide variety of subjects that can pertain to this area of interest. I've heard the saying that "knowledge is power." I plan to learn all I can to live successfully.

With the moral support of the new circle of friends I have been acquiring, I know that I am never alone. There are people I can depend on for truth and companionship in my life. I'll continue to be selective in the type of friendships I'm involved with, and surround myself with positive people.

I'll always be thankful for this second chance I've been given. I have my family, can further my education, and have met many new and interesting friends. The circle of my life continues to grow bigger and better, and even though some of us take longer than others to decide on another path of life, God never gives up on us. I'll take my second chance and use it wisely.

--Theresa Fowler

I OFTEN TOLD MY DAUGHTERS Ashley and Shalia that they didn't get second chances with me. I would not tolerate their behavior. I would ask them once and they had better make sure they listened and heeded my warning, because I would not give another one. I realize now that this was too rigid, no room for compromising or understanding, no flexibility.

Being in prison this time and finding God has taught me to be thankful for second chances. God gave me a second chance in life. I could have died or been strung out on drugs and lost my family, but God gave me a new beginning, a second chance to start fresh. He also gave me the tools to do so.

I'm very grateful that God has spared me. Even though I'm in prison, God is still showing me how to be productive with the time I have. There are things that I still must learn. Being in a therapeutic program that teaches cognitive restructuring is very helpful. It gives me a better opportunity to live a live a positive life.

So I'll take this second chance at life and live it wisely, gracefully, and thankfully. I'll also be more flexible with my daughters!

--Maurice Ervin

I HAVE TO BELIEVE, for myself, that every man is due a second chance. This is what I most desire. However, I know that many people don't feel this way,

and deeper still, many people are not deserving of another shot at anything...

The reality is that I have myself to blame for all my troubles, the years I spent behind bars...but now I am not the same kid I was 20 years ago. Maturity itself is a type of second chance, right? Honestly, when it comes to rapists and molesters even I don't feel any type of sympathy. Should I? Others feel that way about anyone convicted of robbery or murder, but let's look at it all from the other side. Say a young man, 20 years old, commits a robbery, gets caught, and is locked up for 18 years. He is 38 years old! After 18 years of confinement do you think he has the same thought process that he has a 20? It doesn't really matter how you look at it, it is a double-edged sword, because it is possible that he is bitter and angry after all those years, and it is possible that he's scared of the outside world.

Nothing is the same as when he left...

From a Texas aspect, he has gained some positive molding. He has been working on a job assignment and is trained to get out of bed at a certain time, so getting up for a job wouldn't be a major adjustment. If he's gained parole he's also learned problem solving and managing his emotions.

Do I think I deserve a second chance? Of course I do! I want so very much to go home.

The thing is, I am willing to earn a second chance, but no one has told me what or how to go about getting that. Nobody seems to ever be able to see me after they've read my file. A file about a young kid that doesn't even exist anymore...

A second chance? Sometimes I wonder if that is only a fantasy...

--Calvin J. Carter

NO CHANCE FOR A 2ND CHANCE

It's hard for me to nail it down, but I think I once believed nearly everyone deserved a 2nd chance. It sounds nice, doesn't it? Make a mistake, screw up your life, no problem. Learn from it and take another shot at it. Yeah, as an ideal or concept it sounds great.

In reality though, it just doesn't happen that way. Not for most of us convicted of committing a crime anyway. Especially not for those convicted of a serious crime.

Why? Well, to be honest, there's no room for us anymore. Not with well over 6 billion people in this world. Consider that the majority of those 6 billion people are struggling just to get by and, literally, survive. How many of those people do you really think want to see a job, along with the food, shelter, clothing, and money that come with it, go to someone who has already shown they are incapable of living by societies' laws and standards? Very damn few, particularly when those people who aren't breaking the law can't get that job. Can you blame them for feeling that way? I can't.

Hell, the very fact that we are in prison is providing jobs to countless people, many of whom would otherwise be standing in an unemployment or welfare line. Do you think the government doesn't

recognize this? Ever heard of the Prison Industrial Complex? How about Correctional Enterprises? Prisons and prisoners are big business. Lots of money to be made here, folks. Creates an instant demand for low skilled employees in any state. Guaranteed to last as long as there is crime and people who commit it. Not to mention the skilled labor required to build and maintain the prisons. Or the professional people needed to staff them such as doctors, dentists, nurses, accountants, and various administrators. It even extends outside of the prison. Boosting local and state economies, because someone needs to provide support services and products like food and office supplies.

Sure, let's "get tough on crime." Not only does it make sense from moral and economical stand points, it's good politics too. Why, ladies and gentlemen, that fine local official running for office is going to bring JOBS to your community. Yes sir! And by building that local prison he'll be showing you just how "tough on crime" he can be, by God!

He just won't mention the kickbacks he'll get from all the contracts with his buddies to build and supply it. No need for anyone to know about that. Or the fact that he can increase the number of people in his backwoods town in the national census for the purpose of increasing the Federal funding power of rural white areas while decreasing the funding of predominantly black urban areas. After all, he does know that blacks make up the majority of America's over 2 million prisoners. This form of racism and xenophobia is being perpetrated in nearly every state in this country.

Do you really think, with all the money to be made on a personal level, that those people in a position to change the way penal systems operate are going to design or run a humane and rehabilitative system? What, and let all that money disappear? You're kidding, right?

And let's talk about rehabilitation for a minute. Here in North Carolina, it is almost nonexistent. They would rather keep you uneducated and without productive real-world skills so you will be sure to come back. What better way to validate the need for more prisons than to maintain a high recidivism rate? After all, we all know criminals are no good and never will be. So why waste the money to educate them? Lock them up for as long as you can, keep 'em stupid, let 'em out and they'll come right on back or get killed trying to commit another crime.

It's all pretty simple really. And while they are at it, they throw a few more stumbling blocks in that ex-con's way. Like not letting him receive welfare benefits or obtain public housing and student loans.

I've got to be objective here and say that, no, it's not all the system's fault either. A large part of the blame for failing that 2nd chance some people get rests on the ex-con's shoulders' too. Time and again I've talked to guys getting ready to make parole or max-out their sentence and have heard the same story. I'll ask, "What are you going to do when you get out?" The answer is usually pretty vague, or so fanciful and unrealistic it's not funny.

The man just spent 5, 10, 15, 20 years of his life in prison. Ask him if he got his G.E.D.? "No." Take any college courses? "No." Take any classes in masonry, carpentry, small engine repair or cook school? "No." Why not? "Man, I don't need none of that shit. I'm gonna get me a job." Doing what? "I don't know, I'll find something."

Yeah, what he will find is a house to break into, a car to steal or a gas station to rob. Why? Because that's all he knows or ever learned in prison. Came in stupid, went out stupid. He'll either be back in prison within a year or two, or else get killed out there and die stupid.

I've heard it said that prisons are a breeding ground for criminals. Truer words were never spoken. If you weren't criminally minded before you came to prison, you will be if you spend any amount of time in here. You'll learn all kinds of things. The easiest banks, stores, houses, or people to rob. Which cars are the easiest and best to steal. How to defeat alarm systems. Who to contact for a good drug supply. What you need to do to get away with rape and/or murder. All of these things from those who have failed doing them. Anyone who's been caught and imprisoned has failed. Yet these failures are in here perpetuating the stupidity because they are just that, stupid! All the successful criminals are still out there operating.

Oh yeah. You'll also learn how to hate. Hate the government. Hate the system. Hate the police. Hate the man. Hate crackers, burheads, spics, slopes, kikes, ragheads, broads, queers, injuns, bible thumpers, sand niggers, fags, wetbacks, chinks, Jesus freaks, bitches, honkies, niggers, and everyone else, including yourself. One or more of them are out to get you or against you anyway. You can't ever be successful so you might as well fight all of them with as much hate as you can find in yourself. Who cares if you know you can't win? Damned if you'll lost by giving in.

Better yourself? Go to school? Live a straight life? WORK for money? Screw all that! It's easier to hate and blame others for your failure. Besides, only pussies and squares got to school and shit. You're too cool, too hard, too much of a thug for that. Or you don't need it because you've got a "plan."

I've heard this one before, too.

"Yo, my nigga! When I gets out I's gonna have me all kinds a money and bitches. I's gots me a plan, nigga! I'm a git me a key of coke and cooks dat shit up. Then I's bes on my feets!"

Yeah, back in the next open cell or in the county morgue is where he's gonna be.

But hey, like I said, nobody out there wants him out there taking their job anyway. I can't really blame the man for wanting the fast money with all the extras. He might as well try to get it any way he can, I guess. There sure isn't anybody going to sit down with him and give him any encouragement to try to do better. Which one of you is going to show him how to make \$10,000 on a weekend legally? I sure couldn't. Not even \$1,000 a week with his criminal record, no education, and no self-esteem. Be for real!

Sure, you do have a few self-motivated individuals in here that buck the norm. They take advantage of all the educational programs they can. They set realistic goals and plan for a law-abiding, productive future. Many make use of the post-release programs and support groups out there to give themselves a little extra help out of the gate. Or they have family that is willing to give them a shot at a 2nd chance.

Of those few, many are successful at creating as normal a life as is possible for an ex-con. My hat is off to them. They deserve much praise and respect. It takes a very strong willed person to rise above the sludge and slime in here. I wish them every success and happiness in their lives out there. They are the exception.

I'm going to switch gears again and look at something that hits a little closer to home for me. I've primarily been talking about those men and women with prison sentences that allow for the possibility of parole or release.

Now I ask; what about those of us who know we'll never see parole or release? I've got 4 life sentences plus 35 years. I'll be dust before I ever even reach my parole eligibility date. 2nd chances? Uh... yeah ...sure!

I guess you understand a little better now where my outlook on this is coming from. I know I'll never get that 2nd chance, but I still long for it in all its idealistic glory. I even convince myself that one day I'll get that 2nd chance at a life in the free-world.

I don't think I'm much different than most in situations like mine. I dream. I hope. All worthless as far as reality goes, but it provides a modicum of sanity to an insane existence.

I recently read a passage that I thought said it best in a book titled, Gorky Park. (I forgot the author's name)

"It doesn't matter how ridiculous a lie is if the lie is your only chance of escape. It doesn't matter how obvious the truth is if the truth is that you'll never escape."

It stunned me with the simplicity in which the author expressed such a poignant concept.

So, you see? Some of us won't ever get a 2nd chance, but it doesn't keep us from dreaming. I won't let it stop me from striving to better myself while I'm in here. OR prevent me from possibly helping someone else to do so. Maybe that's the reason I'm still alive after being shot several times and narrowly avoiding the death penalty?

Yes, I even have to hope that there is a reason for my very existence anymore.

2nd chances? I wish!

--Kenneth J. French

SECOND CHANCES! Where would we be without them? Who among us has never regretted something we've said or done?

Who among us has never needed a second chance? A chance with the premise of possibilities

and opportunities to fix something that went wrong or a wrong we did! If not for second chances we could never learn from the mistakes made in life.

Where do second chances come from? They come from the human emotions and qualities of love, forgiveness, and friendship. If not for these emotions and qualities, none would ever get a second chance, to try and fix the things in life that need fixing!

Where do second chances take us? For some the risk of giving one, leads to more hurt, anger, and reparation. In others it leads to more love, friendship and closeness.

Why?

--Ricky Williamson

I hope you've enjoyed this look at the theme writing component of this program. Writing is a great way to explore our inner world. It is a chance to figure out how we are thinking about the world, our lives and then putting it down on paper. Prison gives you some time for reflection. Writing your thoughts can make that reflection time more valuable to you and can also offer those in the free world a glimpse into your life and humanity. The more folks on the outside realize that there are real flesh and blood people experiencing the degrading conditions of modern prisons, the more hope there will be for support of prison reform.

UPCOMING THEMES AND DEADLINES:

Fitting In 3/15/04

Simple Pleasures* 4/15/04

*This is a change from previous date.

Coming Clean 5/15/04

Letters 6/15/04

Prison Slang 7/15/04

Aging 8/15/04

And here's a special topic that you can write on any time--**My Advice to a Young Person**. What you have to say could make a big difference in someone's life.

MORE ESSAYS: Here are some inspiring essays on various topics. In sharing them with you, I hope to encourage you to share your thoughts with all of us on the outside who care about what you have to say. I have read the following essay many times. It touches me deeply, and I respect Marshall for his ability to examine and express so well his difficult situation.

LIFE IN A BOX

As I take four steps forward I am faced with a wall painted white that's dirty and peeling with time. I look at the wall and can't help but recall when I wasn't faced with walls and the world was my box. No reins. no boundaries, just wide-open spaces. That time has passed, vanished, and has been erased by lifestyle and choices. My life now consists of these aged white walls and shiny steel that I call a door.

As the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty five days a year, I just wonder do others know what it's like to live a "life in a box"?

Some people would look at the life of Solitary Confinement as hell on earth. Some wouldn't be able to live this life if forced with it. But others take it and use it as a chance given to better understand ones self and to create or find the person that they know they can be. "The nature of solitary confinement removes the everyday responsibilities and distractions from a person's life. Therefore, forcing the person to become more introspective as the days of solitude roll on.

All the time that one spends alone has an effect that is either positive or negative. There's a lot of things to deal with that most people will never know about, due to hectic schedules and the demands of life. For those of us in solitary confinement, it is a long day; everyday faced with challenges and thoughts.

Most of the atmosphere here is ignorant and useless. Filled with conversations that have no need to be evolved. The state has taken thousands of people from different cultures, lifestyles, and perspectives in order to bunch them together into a building full of boxes. Most never had proper schooling which wont be given in solitary confinement. So the years go by as the outside world expands and becomes more advanced while the ones in the box stay the same. There's no hope for most due to; one, the person they are; two, the feeling of no hope; and three, lack of willpower and fear of self-change. Most here are faced with these issues and will not change. Others who have sat and paced while studying their inner-self want more! They realize a life stopped now would only bring on a future laden with problems if ever faced with the outside again. Others just refuse to let their lives turn into ignorance or uselessness. Even though they have been given a "life in a box." They strive for knowledge and use anything they can to feed their mind such as educational books, spiritual books, or any kind of pamphlets that have something to teach, rather than feed into the ways of the system. These boxes were built to break people's spirits as well as their wills. Those who do not grow will wind up with the same ways of thinking in the future, therefore not knowing what to do to make it. It results in these people resorting to criminal activity. They end up back in the box, padding the pockets of the ones in control. They throw us in a box and give us our choice. They know most will not take the initiative to educate themselves. When forced with being one's own teacher, the project seems too big or one is clueless as to where to start. So they fall into exactly what is wanted out of them: a body to fill the box. The living arrangements are simple: a toilet, a sink, a bunk... and you. What else do you need? Well, a life starved from outside communication, such as interaction with others, has proven to have ill effects on people, especially children. Without the proper tools one can't build. So one comes in a child and leaves as an adult but only in appearance. The child is still there, just grown up in the body. Only now, he's grown bitter to everyone without even knowing it, and he's headed down a road that turns right back around to the box. Once someone sets their mind to something, it's hard to turn their thoughts around. So those people are

more or less seen as hopeless individuals. People that are placed in solitary confinement over the years become lazy in the body as well as the spirit, which makes the risk of physical and mental health issues more likely. The state of depression affects most that spend time in solitary confinement. It is almost like a prison that is self-created. One's thinking becomes disorganized; you; at times, feel powerless, frustrated, hopeless, and dehumanized. You get used to being lonely which makes changes in you that you cannot perceive. It makes it hard for others to perceive your real assets, which usually leads to incorrect evaluations by others. This usually leads to an unhappy life that one feels has no meaning, but is forced to live through. Another downside to living in the box is dependency. All that is done here is not always in your control. The officers in control have the power to make all your decisions regarding what you have or don't have, such as food, showers, and recreation. Most are hired off the street or from the unemployment line. It takes no skills, just a GED and a body. They have no professionalism and deal with a person in solitary confinement as if he were a caged animal. A lot are ignorant and only listen to what they are told by their superiors. This also makes life hard by having to rely on one that cares nothing about your welfare. They have the authority to take your time and hold you in a box. While time passes you by, in some instances ones family gives up you. No support from the ones you love takes a lot from you It makes life seem worse and takes just another good thing from your life, so some give up. Their will is broken, their spirit lost. The need or want to go on is lost and some resort to taking actions against ones that they would have never thought of before, that can cost them dearly. The box can take so much from a person that it will leave just a body without any soul. One just goes on with daily activities and follow through the motions. It's hard for many to understand, but it's a daily occurrence in the box. On the upside of things, there are those of us who strive for anything to teach and to obtain any scrap to learn from. Those that don't want life to pass them up will engage their life in ways that will help them to continue living and to do right. Those that are strong willed and refuse to give up to the box will succeed. As some of us reach out for help and gain knowledge from what we can find around us, it is the box that turns us into the one we always wanted to be. Hardship is the key to make some of us wake up. It's the ones on the outside who are patient with us, that help us to grow inside. All we know is what we think to be right, due to the upbringing of our backgrounds and lives. With a drive to go on and elevate ourselves in life we defeat the box. We come to see the bigger picture and leave the dismal little box that our lives have led to. For all those on the outside looking in, the box holds more than just some walls. It holds the power to make or break. Not just a wall but a life with struggles, gain, hope, pain, and loss. For all that read this ask yourself what would you become if faced with "Life in a Box?"

--Marshall Brown 11/03

I CALL THIS DESIGNING FAILURES

When I first reached prison, I didn't understand why so many people come back after being here so many years. Now that I've been here for three years, I find that I know a great deal about this system but I have no understanding as to how it is allowed to function as it does; I have just recently come to accept the bizarre idea that the prison system is not a failure. It is doing what it has been fine tuned to do: generate failures by insuring that a large minority of those that are released from prison will eventually return. The high recidivism rate is not an indication of failure it is a proof that the system is doing its job "quite well". Just how bizarre is this idea you ask? I don't have all the answers but I've come to see a few reasons why this type of prison system would be desirable. It lowers the unemployment rate. Consider that crime or prisoners create jobs: police officers, lawyers, judges, prosecutors, clerks, prison guards, prison medical personnel, and other people who are apart of the "prison administration. Consider also that prisoners are not counted when unemployment statistics are collected. It creates a scapegoat class for the rich and politicians to focus blame upon, for the ills of the society, so that they can maintain power and control. Also consider that poverty, racism, the lack of education and unemployment, are the root cause of crime. We blame the criminal instead of the conditions that created the crime or criminal, and do little or nothing to correct either... Yes it's a tool to control minorities and the poorest of the poor. Hey if the idea still seems bizarre consider the fact that millions of dollars are made from cheap labor of prisoners. Just think what would happen if the state really started to rehabilitate prisoners instead of warehousing them? Obviously they would come out of prison looking for a job rather than looking to pull a job and would be less likely to return to prison... This would mean that California would have to stop building prisons and starting closing them down. This would mean finding another purpose for these costly prisons. A lot of people have an interest in seeing that rehabilitation does not take place behind prison walls. Dostoyevsky got it right when he said, "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by counting its prisons". Prisons have been renamed and are now called correctional facilities, because of the rehabilitation which is suppose to go on inside. When the public looks at the high recidivism rate or hears stories about parolees committing new crimes, they are led to believe that rehabilitation is a failure. They believe it isn't possible, but the truth of the matter is that no valid effort is being made to bring about rehabilitation . From what I have seen rehabilitation did not fail, it was not achieved. It was not achieved because the system isn't interested in rehabilitation. Most prison programs look good on paper, but have little or no rehabilitation value. The only valid rehabilitation program the prison system ever had, was the college program which they stopped back in 92. The coldest thing and the saddest aspect of this whole matter is that prisoners are not only receptive to rehabilitation efforts and programs,

they are anxious even desperate for them. Instead of rehabilitation, they go through dehumanization, and when finally released back into society they are in worse shape than when they first entered prison. The system can judge its success by how quickly the releasee returns to prison. The prison failures are those that some how manage to beat the odds to become law-abiding productive members of society.
--Timothy Jennings

UNITY

You would think, it being the 21st century, we would be beyond race. Since we are all part of the same human race, this should be where we find our pride. Admittedly there is often little to be proud of in our common race. We must all admit to some small part in the failure to produce a generation capable of transcending skin color.

Texas prisons are a dumping ground for the dregs of society. We come to this place to be punished for our crimes. Regardless of the social conditions that may have forced us to this place, we all had choices. Most of us are guilty--if not of the crime for which we were convicted, then for the ones we got away with... In this place where we suffer communality of situations, you would think we could put our racial differences behind us. If we learned to live in unity and brotherhood, we would have defeated the system. When we put as much effort into lifting each other up as we do into putting each other down, all of us will have the respect we so crave: self respect.

We all have anger that dwells in us heart and soul. When we express that anger in violence against each other or the guards who are our keepers, we surrender to the forces arrayed against us. Let your anger drive you to positive goals. Focus on educating yourself academically, vocationally and legally. Express all you feel in art or writing.

When you are finally free of this dark place, remember those you left behind. Work to better their conditions. Tell what prison is like. Those outside do not understand. Each of us must take the responsibility of lifting the veil, which conceals the truth of incarceration. We must all work within our limits, but we must all work together toward this common goal.

It is hard to use anger in a positive manner. Those of you who know me know how often I have failed. Still I believe in my cause. I struggle on. Here I am, using a pen instead of my fist. My fear and anger has been set aside that I might take up this cause with a weapon [my pen] which has a change of triumphing over all who stand against it. Pen is truly mightier than the sword.

My challenge to all of you is to lay aside fear, anger, race and pride. Then take up your torch and let the light of truth cleanse this cage of corruption and malice. Don't dwell on what you cannot do. All are capable, on some level, in this struggle. Together we can turn Texas prison into an institution where unity and brotherhood rule. We, as prisoners, will be one race: the Human Race. By our actions we will better

our own conditions and take away all the weapons that are used against us. Lincoln said "A house divided cannot stand." I say "A house united cannot be defeated."

--Daniel H. Harris

WRITING FOR . . .

In the beginning there was a man who had given up on humanity. Nothing to lose and less to live for. Facing an impossible sentence there was no dreams and little future. Writing was only an entertainment. Fate brought him to a common orbit with College Guild where his teacher saw value in his scribblings. In one shocking comment he said, "Damn it Danny you should be writing." The power of his words was made real and one life forever changed."

Prisoners are disarmed of all but their intellects. This leaves many weaponless. New ways to fight come to light in study. The concept of pen as unconquerable by sword, brought about a change in my view of the world. Once writing is seen in depth it is only logical to embrace it as a weapon of choice. More so for those of us fighting for justice, trapped in bureaucracy, lost to society.

No one told me that the act of writing had a tendency to disarm the writer of all other expressions of dissent. She is a jealous Muse. The worship of Mars barred forever to those she inspires. Now anger is spent in a fury of inspiration.

Exhibiting feelings, airing grievances, documenting despair, release the tensions that would before build to explosions of temper. Just telling someone to expunge destructive emotions, purges the futile hostility from my blood.

Writing has evolved into a catalyst of change: My private revolution. Every word carries the desire to see prison transformed. Not for myself; for those who are sure to follow. No one, no matter their compassion, can ever understand the dynamics of prison life if they have not lived it. It is not a world easily understood vicariously. Even those of us who are living it, see it through different eyes: Our opinions colored by personal experiences. Yet, we strive to paint the colors of our visions in words to make them accessible to our readers.

All writing is done for self. First, and always, it must please the writer: whether anyone else is pleased or not. But, a writer's gratification is multiplied when his joy is shared by another with like views. To have a person grasp the concepts you advocate is bliss. The compliment of having your words quoted is inexpressible.

Most of all writing is an act of ego. A wish to leave one small mark on the world at large, to scent immortality, is our strongest incentive. Will one day, in a musty tome, my writings be read, and the ancient horror of prison be revealed by words to a society that knows no such institution? Maybe not. But, at least now I have a dream.

--Daniel Harris

SPECIAL THANKS: I want to thank Danny Harris, not just for his writings in this newsletter, but, truth be known, he is the #1 person who inspired me to send books to inmates. He wrote a letter to the Alternatives Library 2 years ago asking for books, saying he had heard that we sent law books into prison. I wrote back saying, "sorry, no such program exists." He replied, thanking me for writing, letting me know how often he had sent out requests, and never gotten a reply. I was touched by the words in his reply even though I had turned him down. I realized I had some books in a storeroom left over from a book sale we had to support our programs at MacCormick Secure Facility. I sent him a box of books. His joy at receiving the books was infectious, and I've been sending books ever since. Clearly he has succeeded in using his pen and his words to create change. I salute you, Danny, and all of you taking part in this program and trying to better yourself through reading and writing.

I planned to include much more info in this newsletter, but postage and copying costs being what they are, I have to cut it short and send collected resource information in the next newsletter. If you would like to keep receiving this newsletter or being involved in other parts of this program, please fill in the questionnaire below. If you see this newsletter by way of another inmate and don't have a copy of the questionnaire and permission slip allowing us to use your profile and writings, drop me a line, and I'll send one to you

Happy Trails,
Gary

REMEMBER, if you want a complete set of writings on a topic, you must submit your own essay.

