

Prisoner Express News Winter 2020

Greetings and welcome to Prisoner Express and the tapestry of activities we have to offer this cycle. There are some talented folks creating our new programs this cycle and I look forward to sharing the details about them later in this issue.

My name is Gary, and I work at the Durland Alternatives Library. The library's collection focuses on social justice, self-empowerment, and education. Our collection of books helps people connect the dots to figure out what's going on in the age of corporate control and greed. Despite my pessimism in the current version of the American Dream, I am still amazed by the kindness and desire to do good in the world by the people I meet through the Prisoner Express program. At times, I have trouble reconciling the harsh public face of American politics and culture with the beauty and kindness I see in everyday life. Certainly, life is full of paradoxes.

Prisoner Express began when I sent a single package of books to Danni in Texas 18 years ago. Now, we have thousands of prisoners and hundreds of community and student volunteers writing and participating in a variety of creative arts and educational adventures. Many of you writing are basing your idea of what we do on a listing you saw in a resource guide. Whatever you have read may or may not be correct. The good news is that after you read this newsletter, you will know just what we do offer. You are invited to come along and join the fun. Our mission is to provide incarcerated men and women with information, education and opportunities for creative self-expression in a public forum. Judging from many of your letters back to us, I know we are succeeding, and even more, you let us know what is important to you. This helps us continue developing meaningful programs. The feedback from my original reply to Danni all those years ago launched PE. Now, there are thousands of you providing feedback, and we have hundreds of volunteers interacting with you through the programs.

Before listing our new programs, I want to address some common questions or concerns. You may sign up for any programs listed, but please sign up for projects you intend to complete. Selecting only programs, you will complete allows us to serve more people. Most of our mailings are sent by USPS bulk mail regulations. It means each educational packet is mailed as part of a large batch of identical mail for much lower rates. If we send individuals mail through first class mail it is so much more expensive. It is important that you enroll by sending your choice of programs by early April to be on the mailing list for the programs in this newsletter. If you send in requests after that you may not get the packet. I am starting to put copies of the educational packets on the PE website, so you could have someone on the outside print and mail it to you. Until someone donates a chunk of money, our best practice is to send programs by bulk mail as we do. You can do the math. This newsletter will go to 4,000 people and postage is around 20 cents per newsletter. Total postage costs \$800. Now imagine it costing \$1.25 first class and the postage cost is \$5000. We will go broke quickly if we stray from this operational decision.

As many of you are finding out, we have an active group of volunteers who read your journals, themes and poems and also view the art you submit. Participating in these programs is the best way to get a personal letter. **I know many of you have read listings that say we have a pen pal program. This is not true.** Some of the volunteers here do develop a long pen pal relationship with some PE participants, but more likely you will have a series of shorter writing relationships with several different volunteers. The students who volunteer value the letters they share with you, and I hope you get good benefits from the personalized correspondence as well. Like you, all students who volunteer in the program are assigned a number. Please include the number on your envelope so we can get your letter to the intended person. Also put your name on all your submissions, ex art, poetry, themes, journals. Sometimes the work is separated from the envelope and if there is no name...

I know that we often think we need big and glorious strokes to change this world, but what I am seeing is how relationships and ideas are changing individuals one word, one story at a time. The cumulative effect of sharing writing with folks in the free world is having an impact on both sides. Your bodies are confined but your minds are free. Our goal is to help you utilize your mind and your awareness to enhance your experience of life. No matter where we are, there is suffering to manage, and many of you are modern day warriors at standing up to and persevering even in difficult times. Please keep writing and sharing your stories.

In our last cycle we began 2 programs, "Let's Learn Spanish" and "Building a Book" that will run for a year. They are closed now, and we will only work with folks already enrolled in the project. In the past we tried to catch everyone up as each new lesson was mailed, but it got too complicated and it ended up leaving us feeling incomplete. So, we are trying something new. If you signed up for Building a Book or Spanish be sure to respond to the first mailing so you can keep getting the successive mailings. In general, please note that if we do not hear from you by Aug 1 of 2020 you will drop from our active mailing list. **You can always rejoin the mailing list by sending a letter, and of course always alert us to any address change.** If you are feeling bad about not being a part of these two projects, take comfort knowing we will offer them both again when the current session is finished. Also, if you are reading this newsletter and it is after the April 2020 deadline for registering.... No worries. Drop us a line and ask for the next newsletter Summer 2020. The newsletter comes out every 6 months and it is a standalone introduction that will get you up to speed and able join in with us in creating a brighter world!

The rules in prison mailing rooms keep changing depending on what state you are in, or if you are in a federal facility. I think that may be contributing to the many notices of undelivered mail we receive. If you do not receive lessons in this newsletter by mid May 2020 let us know. Hopefully we will figure out exactly what is allowed by your facility. I can tell you, I get super frustrated when mail is returned undelivered, because I imagine you think we have blown you off. In truth we do make some mistakes, but mostly if you don't hear from us it is because a letter or mailing was denied. I apologize for a system that focuses more on punishing

and spends less time on rehabilitation. I figure giving specific details will not gain any advantage, and only cause me more tsouris.[Get out the dictionary]. **If you participated in our programs last cycle, please take the time to fill out the chart at the very back of the newsletter** letting us know if you received the programs you requested and what you thought of them. Judging by the amount of mail that was rejected I expect to hear a lot of sad stories. I hope I am wrong. We need to create an updated database on what the rules are state by state and sometimes even within states. I know how frustrating it is for you to not get your mail in a timely fashion, and I ask your understanding as we at PE try to understand why your mail was not delivered. Is mail denied because you are released, moved, or is it being denied, and you are still at the same address? I don't want to send mail when you are not there, but I also don't want to remove you from our mailing list just because I get notice of mail being rejected. I have a stack of rejected mail and we got through it doing our best to find any updated addresses. It is very time consuming.

I enjoy dialoguing with you about the many mysteries of everyday life. Despite all our differences, humans are pretty much the same, searching for belonging, meaning, identity and purpose in an ever-changing universe. Despite the adversity we all face, I celebrate our chance to connect and share and relate to our common experience on this planet. **Throughout the newsletter, I will include comments sent to us by folks who filled out the survey we ran last summer. They appear randomly throughout the newsletter (like the one right below!). We are glad to be of help.**

"A way for my voice to be heard by the world" – How is PE affecting you? summer 2019 survey response

Winter 2020 Programs Offerings

Expedited Books - Book mailing is how the PE experiment began and it still feels like an important component of what we do. **This program is the only one we offer that has a small cost.** We get donated books from all sorts of places and use them to create customized book packages for individuals. Every state seems to have different rules about how this can work so be sure to find out if you can receive a package of books. Because we are a library, we have the privilege of sending books into prisons. We ask that you send \$4.00 to offset the price of postage. A typical package will have 4 to 7 books. We ask that you supply us with a variety of topics for the books you request. If we don't have what you want, we do our best to create a book package that we think you will enjoy. If you want a specific book and are particular that you only get that book, then this is not the program for you. Our selection is generally very good, and we generally can match topics but not particular books. Also, some subjects are in high demand and the minute we get a good how to draw book, chess book, computer science book etc. they are shipped out. You may get lucky and be the ones getting them or you may have to accept substitutes. That is why it is important to give us a variety of topics to choose from. There are a few hundred people ahead of you waiting for books, and it can take a couple months for the package to get to you. For those who

regularly participate in the program, I get your feedback and I know you value this service. On the signup sheet you can let us know the rules for sending books to you,

Poetry Anthology Vol 23 - Every six months we print a poetry anthology created by volunteers who have read through all the poetry submitted in the previous cycle. We just finished Vol 22 and the 560 of you who participated have probably received it. Everyone who submits a poem for consideration will receive Voile 23. It is a big job reading the many thousands of poems submitted and then choosing the ones for the anthology. Poetry is so subjective and the people choosing bring their own experience and bias to the project. If your poem is not selected it doesn't mean it wasn't good or appreciated, but rather the students who created the anthology simply choose other poems because they felt more connected to them. My hope is that you reading the poems of others going through a similar experience helps you better understand your own feelings and experiences and makes you aware that you are not alone, and that your humanity is intact and fully functioning. Because you are in prison, please don't think you have to write about that. Incarcerated or not, you are free to write poems on any subject that you feel drawn to express. Below is a sample of some poems we recently received. Please put your name on all your submissions in the creative writing projects

Letter To My Child

By: Kevin Hale

Here's a letter to my little one,
I don't know you but just know,
That I have loved you all the while.
And while your mother kept you from me,
I don't harbor no ill will
I was a jerk to walk up out on her,
I know the pain she feels.
For she did what she knew best,
Then grabbed hold of what she had,
Yet what I regret the most,
Is not being there to be your dad.
Child forgive me for my shortcomings,
I know I've got a few,
And whether or not,
I ever meet you,
Dad'll always still love you

#END CANCER

By: M.Hawkins

Show some love, fight to end cancer,
Because we can't allow it to win...
It affects us all,
Children, women, and men...

Inside of our bodies,
Is where cancer tries to cower and hide...
You can take my hair, my health, my life,
But you will never take my pride...

Here at Old Folsom Relay for Life has given us all a
Voice to inspire and share the raw emotions we feel...
The idea is we all can make a difference,
Thank Old Folsom Today for making this real...

We all face personal struggles, different forms of
Persecution, but the road to Infinity, requires empathy
and unselfish contributions. Everyone matters even
Those we've lost...
The cure is coming, united as one, even us
Behind bars, are willing to contribute to
The cost...

Cancer has taken so many in life,
And left its permanent hole
But like the CW, we DARE to Defy,
By never surrendering our compassionate, hopeful soul...

#END CANCER

In a Day Dream **By: Liam Foster**

Stuck lost in a day dream,
I wonder what it all means.
When thoughts flutter in,
And memories shatter apart.

What is real- is what I feel ,
Yet what I feel- is it real?

I know not what will be,
For the past returns at last.
Is life but a mistake,
That haunts us like a nightmare.

For truly nothing's fair,
When fate rules without a care/.

The moment is ever fleeting,
Leaving us ever wanting;
Wishing upon a golden future,
That's ever so distant/

Thus it's hope
That clever demon,
Lurking in my chest,
Never giving me any rest/

Endless thoughts plague me anon,
Till I awake from these dreams,
I wonder if they can even hear me scream.

The Window **By: Nate High**

Sometimes I stand out and stare through the dirty glass,
Self inflicted pain is all I gain by watching the world pass.

I entered prison young, a child with a fortified future,
Life without parole creates gaping holes that can't be closed by
any suture.

I've become the man without a past, a boy without a story to tell,
After 18 years in prison, all I know are days wasted away in a cell.

I was 14 and in the 8th grade when I did what they said I did.
But when it comes to murder no one cares if you're only a kid.

Sentenced to Forever, I no longer believe that I matter,
I am just a broken soul where every dream is eventually
shattered.

Self gratification is the key to trying to survive,
Just breathing is more important than finding meaning, when
you're fighting to simply stay alive.

This window is hell, it reminds of a life that's not meant for me,
But when you live in a cell, the darkness can't be all you see.

So I embrace the pain and watch as the world passes me by,
And I grow stronger with every tear that I silently cry.

Meditation Project - Tara has been leading the meditation project for several years. It began as a Buddhist meditation instruction, but it has grown into a more universal project as it has evolved. Tara sees the value of many spiritual practices, and her meditation instruction can be suitable for anyone who wants to increase their awareness and sense of self. This is a time when peer influence and the difficulties in your environment can affect you greatly. Meditation is a tool that can allow you to find balance within yourself even as the world continues to spin off kilter. Tara has a big heart and she is opening it to you. In her pamphlet she will share simple accessible meditation techniques as well as testimonials from some of the folks she has been working with through PE. Prison is often a place where people say there is nothing to do. Meditation is often described as a process where you sit and do nothing. Really something deeper is going on, but it appears to be well suited for your circumstances. Below are some thoughts from Tara

Dear friends,

A warm greeting to all of you. If you ever wanted to learn how to meditate or are already meditating and would like to be part of a Sangha, spiritual community, I invite you to join our ongoing meditation circle. My name is Tara. I've been meditating with different traditions for over 40 years -Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Jewish and I welcome the wisdom and compassion of all traditions: each a different color of the rainbow that comes from the same divine source of pure light, pure love.

I offer Newsletters a few times a year - mostly focusing on mindfulness and simple but powerful Buddhist practices, but also include teachings and inspirational quotes from mystics and teachers of different traditions, as well as quotes from our Sangha. We also send Buddhist paperback books and Tricycle Magazines from a library.

And we keep working on getting you a current Resource List. When I get more funding, I will be able to send altar cards of Buddhas.

Our next newsletter will be out in the spring.

I read every letter I receive, but I'm sorry I cannot answer everyone because of our growing sangha (almost 600!) But know that you are heard, and I answer questions in the newsletters. With every letter I read, I say a prayer for you.

I wish you all a year with peace and kindness. As the Dalai Lama said, "Loving kindness is my religion."

Blessings and Happy New Year, Tara

ART - Treacy has been leading our flourishing art program for 10 years and I see from the letters you write to her that her artistic sensibilities resonate with many of you. Below you will read her update on the art program. She recently shipped one of our traveling art shows to Denver, CO for a display. We hope to have 3 traveling shows to share and circulate in galleries across the US. We do this to raise awareness, and at present are not interested in selling your art. If what you want is an art agent to help you sell your stuff, we are not that. We are here to help you celebrate and develop your creative abilities. Treacy shares stories and techniques that she has studied in her "ARTknows" Newsletter. Sign up if you'd like to get the next copy. Below is Treacy's update on all things art

Dear Artists.

Greetings!

Hope all is well and that you have a great New Years! Here are some of the projects for this year-

Art exhibitions:

Spring exhibition at the Big Red Barn - Yes, the annual spring exhibition at the Big Red Barn on Cornell's campus is coming up in April. We are accepting submissions. There is no specific theme for this exhibition, and you do not need to sign up for this - just send in artwork.

First Universalist Church of Denver exhibition: This is a new exhibition for us. On learning about the art program at PE, the Denver church contacted us with the hope of exhibiting your work at the church. As Gary noted above, I just sent a collection of your art to the church. I anticipate they will have an evening of letter-writing and you might receive a letter from the congregation - much like Monday letter-writing here at Cornell.

Philadelphia exhibition at the Drawing Room. This is also a new exhibition for the PE artists. This is a gallery space in Philadelphia owned by a friend of mine, Rachel Bliss. Rachel and I went to art school together. She is interested in exhibiting the work of artists who are not often included in the commercial

galleries. For February, Rachel is focusing on exhibiting art on the subject of love or a variation of that. I will go through the PE archives and select art that fits this theme. If your work is selected, I will send you a letter. Further into the year we will have another exhibition of PE art at the Drawing Room; theme to be decided. In addition, Rachel and I are planning an all-women exhibition. Because there are so few women sending us art, this will have to be planned. Please send me a note if you are a woman and would like to participate in this exhibition. I'm not sure why there are so few women participating in the exhibition. Unfortunately, as you all know, women present a different perspective that is often under-represented in the world. In all her exhibitions Rachel only exhibits drawings which include watercolors, ink, pencil. Confusingly enough in the art world watercolors are considered drawings. She does not exhibit paintings. There is no sign-up for this, but when you send work in, specify if it is an option for Philadelphia.



When you wake, you will have cake. This is the title of the sculpture that I am working on in my studio (as see above of lambs' heads.) The sculpture is created from the letters you send. It will include a total of 40 lambs' heads exhibited of a continuous line on a wall shelf. The sculpture is inspired by the words of a lullaby entitled "All the pretty horses":

In the lullaby, the slave mother laments for her dead child; died because she had to care for the plantation children making her absent from caring for her own children. I became interested in the parent-child relationship when these crucial relationships are interrupted. In the story of the lullaby, the separation is due to racism. Of course, incarceration creates a separation between child and parent. If any of you parents are interested in sharing your parental experiences - exploring both the difficulties imposed by incarceration, but also some of the positive experiences. I would be interested in hearing from you. If you want, your stories can be included in the exhibition.

The animation project is still chugging along, and we hope to scan the drawings and begin production this spring

ARTknows:

The last two issues have been dedicated to materials and techniques of art. In the next issue I am inviting a guest artist to share his creative experiences. I am including guest artists so that you read a wider range of ideas. In addition to the guest artists, I will continue to focus on a specific theme or idea. Possible themes are portraits through history and various techniques of creating portraits; women in art; street art, the list is endless. Maybe landscape!

Prison art archives: Caitlin has been developing archives for much of the art that will allow anyone to see it through the PE website. Not all art will be archived, but much will. We are featuring art from the archives in this newsletter.

Forthcoming book:

"Marking Time; Art in the time of incarceration" is a forthcoming book written by Nicole Fleetwood; to be published April 2020. Nicole is a Rutgers University professor who has been writing about prison art for several years. She asked me to submit some of the PE art for the book. I don't know if or what has been included in the book. Nicole was also kind enough to interview me about PE programs. The publisher has agreed to publish an additional number of copies to be distributed to prisoners and Nicole asked if we could distribute the book to you. If you are interested in receiving a copy of this book, please sign up for it on the last page of this newsletter. I am not sure how many copies she is donating. Distribution will be made on a first-to-answer basis.

Other projects:

Monday night letter-writing begins at the end of January when the students return from vacation. Please continue to send work for the students to see – they really enjoy seeing and writing to you.

pARTner project. This is an art mentoring program that I wrote about a year ago. If you signed up for this but haven't heard from anyone yet, it is because there are not enough outside artists with whom you can connect. It is Wendy Jason (Justice Arts Coalition) and my hope that through the exhibitions we have developed, people will be interested in participating in this program.

Kindness. This is a really old project exploring the nature of kindness in prison and several of you wrote to me describing some aspects of kindness in prison (There were four questions I asked) Well, I finally got it posted in Wendy Jason's blog for the Justice Arts Coalition. If you contributed some ideas to this project and would like to read about it, write to me and I'll send you a copy.

That's it!
Treacy

"Provided a positive productive way to use time where the system has failed us." – How is PE affecting you? summer 2019 survey response



Art by **Corey Higgins**

Chess Club - Many of you received our last chess lesson created by Robert. It included a long section on the history of chess. Typically these packets offer chess strategy, puzzles, a section on famous chess players and their historic matches. The packets will teach notation and sometimes review the rules. They are meant for all who know basic chess and want to become better players. The next packet will be done in collaboration by Robert and Dave who was our chess guru before Robert joined the PE team. If you have any suggestions for the chess packet be sure to send them to Robert c/o PE.

SongWriting - Kathy Z is once again going to lead a PE music project. In the past she has focused on songwriting. She is a talented and accomplished musician, and also a great writer. I look forward to what she will bring to this next cycle's programs. Kathy lives in Europe and in the past the delay in forwarding your mail to her caused problems in how we managed her course. Now that I have entered the 21st century I can scan your responses and quickly send it to Kathy electronically. I hope you can have some fun with this project. Kathy's words follow..

Hey all. Greetings to you from across the sea. My name is Kathy, Kathy Z. (a poem)

I'm here to say hello and to offer the possibility of a guided exploration into songwriting. I have written two previous courses for Prisoner Express which you may have seen depending on how long you have been reading this newsletter. The first course included a group project which was successfully recorded and still being listened to....one song from many beautiful voices....the voices of those living in the American prison system. My second

course offered more exercises designed to help the songwriting process and offered the chance to create lyrics for kids to sing....kids growing up in the communities more susceptible to landing a long term stay in the criminal "justice" system. I am enthusiastic about offering another course and currently thinking about what that would be.

Although I am American, I have been living in the Netherlands for twelve years and raising my two kids here. Songwriting and making music have long been my lifeline, my means to connect, and sometimes even a way to earn some extra cash. I work as a luthier: guitar builder/ repair person.....sounds glamorous, but mostly I am setting up guitars to be sold, one after the other....working with the hands is nice, but leaves a lot of time for too much thinking. Something, I imagine, you all can relate to! In addition, I've been working with elderly people on a project basis. The Netherlands has a lot of programs for aging people to maintain a quality of life. I've been bringing memories into being and then transforming them into songs. We recorded them and created a chorus who sang mostly for other groups of elderly. Imagine becoming a performer/ recording artist for the first time after the age of eighty. They love it!

I would say that, in the process of writing these songwriting courses for prisoners, I probably have learned more than anything I may have taught...an unexpected journey. I have learned about grace and resilience...that's a positive thing to witness. Less confronted by the stories I receive, the tales of dark realities, the lack of humanity, the long sentences without rehabilitation, mental health issues being ignored, desperation, loneliness....none of these things can be forgotten. I have struggled in my urge to offer something. The more I learn, the less I can filter out. Sometimes I wonder if I am offering a false hope and don't know if that is ultimately helpful or more damaging? I haven't been able to answer all of the beautiful letters that are written to me. Does that create more loneliness? I don't want to harm but have limits in the face of what is needed. Regardless, I won't choose the path of shutting it out. So much of life on the outside is just like this. We are faced daily with things we may be tempted to ignore, problems which seem too overwhelming and unsolvable. Somewhere, there is a balance between awareness and shutdown. This is what I would like to explore with you through the process of songwriting.

I want this course to focus on the process more than the result. If you are looking more to the end game in the form of making money, creating a name for yourself, gaining success, getting out of prison.....those are all worthy causes, but won't be addressed in this course. I want to guide you to finding creativity, inspiration, flow as a means to heal, a means to survive. There are no other guarantees to the process than the ones which will affect your being. Topics we will look at may include, but not be limited to: cultivating presence, achievable goals, creating community, looking at how your environment creates the context for creativity, and finding a love of self. I am going to use songwriting as the central force behind these themes. We will create real song texts and my hope is to use them as I did before to create more awareness and understanding of the massive amount of human potential which lives and breathes behind bars. More recordings

are in the planning, and more networking with outside of prison communities. All of humanity needs healing right now, and we are all a part of that inevitable path. If you are interested in exploring these potentials, your own unlimited voices, or simply wanting to try.....please join my course for Spring 2020. Wishing you a moment of peace in the meantime, your advocate, Kathy Z.

Birds - Sanjna, a student at the university has been reading your letters through her participation in the journal project. Those of you who have been writing to her, have touched her deeply with your words and intent to grow even while in prison. She wants to add to all of your experience by sharing information on a subject she finds fascinating..BIRDS.. I know that for many, birds are an afterthought, but as you enter the world of birds, and learn about them, it can be fascinating. I have a friend who is a bird watcher and I have been joining her on bird walks this past year. It is a great way to experience nature. Cornell University has a world-famous lab of ornithology and Sanjna will use these resources to create an interesting lesson in bird life. Getting more familiar with the natural world can be a great tool in staying balanced. Here is Sanjna's description

For a couple months now, I have been working on putting together a newsletter about everything related to birds in my spare time. Have you ever wondered how birds know where to migrate? Or how birds evolved? This will answer these questions plus lots more! Birds might seem ubiquitous in our daily lives but there's still so much we're trying to understand (especially in areas like bird behavior).

This newsletter is designed to help get your feet wet in the field of ornithology and hopefully teach you some interesting information related to bird identification, migration patterns, and mating rituals. The process of developing this newsletter has very much been a learning process for me as well so I'm excited to share everything that I've learned with you. After hearing from several of you over the last year or so, I know some of you will have things to teach me about birds as well! My goal through this project is of course to educate but also to encourage you to share any bird-related stories or even poems! Art is always welcome too :) I'm hoping I can take some of these responses and include them in the following newsletter to highlight the importance of birds and preservation in this age of modernization.

Special project opportunity from Sanjna - You do not have to sign up for this. Read her offer and if you are interested follow up directly to her. She has been inspired to seek out stories of personal growth. I am always thrilled when I have an aha moment, and I see things more clearly. Sometimes they can be triggered by a positive experience and other times from experiencing something traumatic. It is interesting the ways in which I have learned my lessons. I hope to read your stories of what you have learned from life's lessons

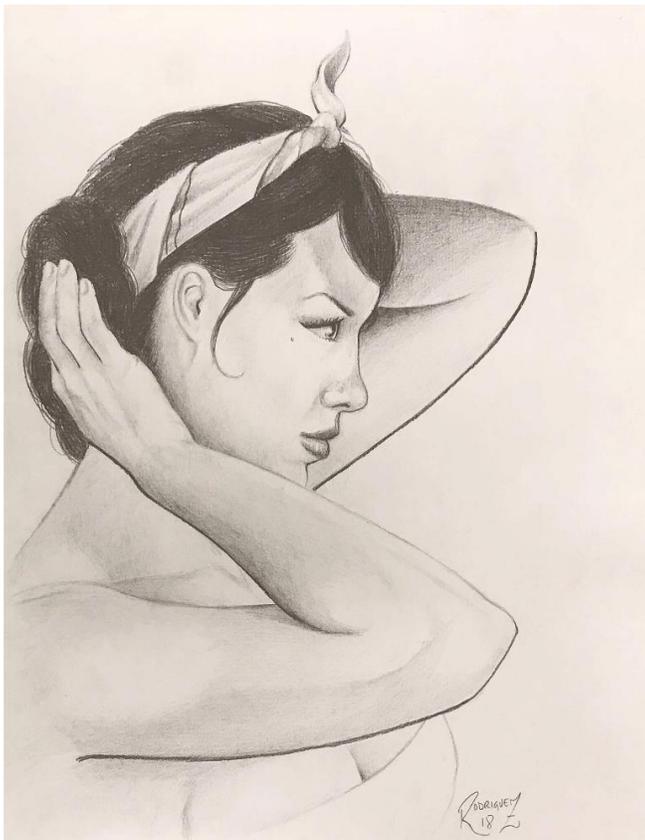
Hi. Besides creating the birding project, I have another idea that inspires me. As a volunteer at PE I read a story about the choices a PE member made, the circumstances he faced, and how all of this contributed to where he is now, but more importantly, what

he's learned from all of this. I couldn't stop thinking about what he wrote and was moved by his words.

I want to collect several stories on this theme and create an anthology of tales of growth and survival from some of you who are part of this PE program. I hope to assemble some of these stories into a print book, but I will definitely be able to create an online document on the PE website with a collection of stories.

People on the outside often forget the humanity of people in prison, but your letters and stories have shown me that people don't deserve to be defined by their past and that there's always the possibility of change and growth. Your words have created this entire Prisoner Express Program, and now I wish to share your stories with an even larger audience. Because I want to capture as many stories and perspectives as possible, I would like to limit the stories to 500 words. I know it can be difficult to limit what's essentially a tale of your identity to just 500 words, but that's part of the challenge!!

I'm SO excited to take on this project and am grateful for anything and everything you all have to offer as well as Gary's unwavering support. If you decide you would like to share your story, please include Sanjna #5 on the front along with Anthology Project on the front so that it gets to me directly without any delays! Thank you for everything you do.



Art by **Edward Rodriguez** from the Archives

Essential Financial Planning- Just as I was finishing this newsletter, I was contacted by Tsehay. She is offering financial literacy education. She has started an organization, Valiant, that specializes in providing financial literacy to

underserved populations. Not only that but she wants to include your family members in help create a financial plan. So many of you have plans for what you might do when you are released. Tsehay's packet might provide the step you need in planning for your future.

Do you want to learn about money? Are you planning for your/your family's future? Have you thought about starting your own business? Do you want to talk with your family or loved ones about any of these items, but unsure where to start? Then this course is for you. This course will provide you with the tools for a good foundation with personal financial planning - the building block for all financial planning. You will learn about budgeting, savings, setting goals, and more. Valiant provides easily accessible personal financial planning services to make money management simple. Your family members can also request a packet so you can work on this course simultaneously.—Tsehay

Journal Project- The journal project may currently be our most popular. Certainly, it generates the most writing. Students read and file your journal entries as they come in. Many of the students who read your entries take the time to write a friendly letter back to you. It is the closest thing to a pen-pal we can offer. As I mentioned the student volunteers come and go so sometimes you might write a few times and sometimes it will just be once, but I know from many of the letters I receive that this correspondence is meaningful to many of you. Equally important though is keeping a journal. Journal writing gives you the opportunity to explore your life, your thoughts, your moods and your imagination. You can plan for the future, examine the past or document the present. This past summer we began scanning all of the journals from 2016 to summer 2019 into digital files and in a few months, we will go about and add the new entries to the digital file. I am still trying to figure out how much of these journals we should make public and look to you for feedback. If you sign up for the journal project we will send you a packet detailing the project and give a list of suggestions on how and why to keep a journal. You do not have to wait to receive this packet to get started. Just start writing about your life and send it to us whenever you want. Some folks send in their entries weekly, and others daily or monthly. You get to control when you send in your work. If a student writes you, please note their assigned number and include it on the envelope. This way we can be sure the student gets your letter.

Book Club Slaughterhouse-Five - A novel by Kurt Vonnegut is our next book club selection. We have 500 copies. This course this will be a limited enrollment project so please understand if you are closed out. Once all copies are mailed, we will close enrollment. There will be a series of thought-provoking questions that will be sent with the book. We will create a compilation of the most interesting responses to these questions. Please if people you know want to read it too, order one copy and share. Let other folks who have a slower mail service have a chance. This project is focused how we can help our neighbor and noticing how it actually helps ourselves. Share the book and the questions with your institution's library if you can. Slaughterhouse Five is an anti-war science fiction novel following

the life of Billy Pilgrim from his time during WW2 to his capture and jailing in a zoo on planet Tralfamadore. It is a fast read. The book is sometimes funny, sometimes sad and always involves time traveling. It was super popular in the early 1970's and was made into a film. The author Kurt Vonnegut was a widely popular writer, and this book seemed to be his breakout novel. I read it in 1970 and then read everything else he wrote over that decade. I am curious as to what you will think of this book.

Theme Writing - Every month we offer you a word theme and ask you to write a short story/essay on the theme. This project originally started as so many of the PE participants wrote that mail was so important to them. I knew I could not write a personal letter to all the participants, so this project was started to get you interesting creative mail. Here is how it works. If you send in an entry for a given month, your entry is typed along with all the other entries that month. The packet of all typed essays is sent to everyone who has taken the time to write.

In the **Word Themes** we ask that the stories be true, they can be musings on life or remembrances, but not made up stories, and that you limit them to 700 to 800 words. We have many people writing these days and we can't accept long essays, especially ones that are off topic or not based on a true story. We select a few themes and reprint them in this newsletter. Below you will see a list of the upcoming themes and then a sampling of themes that we received on topics posted in our last newsletter. There is a **Picture Theme** project described later in this newsletter where you can write fiction or nonfiction. It too is limited to 800 words. I struggle to fit as many of these themes into the newsletter as I can fit. **That is why the font is so small in the newsletter!** We receive so much interesting writing that it becomes a challenge to pick only a few to share with you in the PE News. If you enjoy reading these themes, then try your hand at writing one. Your writing will be included in a larger packet and we will mail you a copy. [A new rule we will be following is if we reach 60 typed pages in a packet, we will have to omit some writings. That seldom happens. I do some omit writings if I believe inclusion will get the entire packet censored in the mailrooms of the other authors. I also don't like to include hate rants especially when they are hateful to groups because of their religion, race, gender, ethnicity or anything else that seems irrelevant. I don't mind a rant if it is about an individual's action that you want to share, but not ones that blast whole groups for an individual's actions. Most of you don't display either hate or inappropriate tales in your stories, but I wanted to mention this to all of you writers as a group. Please keep sharing your stories and keeping it real.

Upcoming Word Themes and submission deadlines

Arguments	due	3/1/20
Clothes	due	4/1/20
Nourishment	due	5/1/20
Resilience	due	6/1/20
Making Ends Meet	due	7/1/20
Making Love	due	8/1/20
Debts	due	9/1/20
Rescued	due	10/1/20

Previous Themes

When life gives you _____ make a _____

"When Life Gives You Crap, Make a Garden" by Deric Conn

At times, life throws a heap of shit that may seem unbearable your way. In trying times, you may feel like giving up and "throwing in the towel." I have my own scars to prove I've had such moments in my life. My faith has shown me that anything that happens, whether good or bad, can be used for our good.

We might not fully understand why crap gets thrown our way, but we can choose to wallow in feces or we can use it as fertilizer to help a garden grow. I choose to make a garden, and to see the beauty even in the midst of my trials.

I am that garden, and I can only grow to maturity by allowing the crap in my life to make me a better person. And along with growth, weeds and thorns will try to grow with us, and try to choke us out. We have to be stronger than our circumstances, and even in prison, we must choose to grow and expand. That way, when we leave this seemingly God-forsaken place (trust me, God hasn't forsaken any one of us), people won't see the excrement-stained garments of our past. People will see a garden, beautifully planted and grown for change.

And to you that may not see the other side of freedom, do not lose heart. I believe in a God that can not only free from a sinful past, but in a God who can also give an eternal future.

May we all choose to use the crap in our lives to grow us into the garden we desire.

"When life gives you crap, make room for more" by Steven P. Arthur

It would be really easy for me to fall into depression, offer excuses and just plain give up on life. Prison sucks. Never in my wildest dreams would I have ever thought I would end up in a maximum-security prison serving a life sentence. But alas, here I am and that is exactly what I'm doing. But you won't hear me cry about it... often. No. I prefer to take what life has thrown my way, mostly because of my own choices, and make the best of it. Honestly, if it weren't for prison, I seriously doubt I would've ever discovered how much I love to read or how much I have to say or share in the form of writing. More often than not, I sit down in front of this antiquated machine, a "Neo," which according to "The American Century" dictionary means "new or modern" (I can assure you that it is anything but) and just start writing. With no idea, direction, or prompting, I just let the words come to me.

Sometimes I find many pearls of wisdom, good story ideas, or just plain junk in my writing. But it's mine!!! My thoughts, my dreams, ideas, and creations. I can build worlds with my words, or with people and places little known or never having existed. So, I encourage all of my fellow writers, wherever you are, whatever you're doing, however bad you may or may not

have it, make the best of it. Love your life, embrace the suck no matter what it is because it is the only one you have.



Art by Edward Rodriguez

“When Life Gives You Pain Make Poetry” By Chad Frank

This has been my motto for years. Whenever I’m having a hard time, I pick up a pen and dig deep into my wounds, laying myself bare on the blank page. It’s a cathartic experience that always produces beautiful art. I’ve been getting more and more poems published and responses from readers, which shows that my work registers with others.

I’ve found that when life gives me pain, it’s best to make poetry and I suggest you all give it a try.

“Life’s Great Enigma” by Bobby Bunderson

“When life gives you ___ make ____.”

The most exhilarating sensation that I have ever experienced happens while I stargaze toward the heavens in the sprawling Arizona desert. Isolated from any cities, towns, or industrial complexes, the otherwise inky black night sky is magically transformed into a living tapestry of tiny blinking lights. These sparkling little diamonds twinkle upon their velvety backdrop with unsurpassed, awe inspiring grandeur.

Imagine a trillion stars, billions of light years away, displaying their brilliance to every living creature in the universe. This extraordinary spectacle has been imprinted indelibly upon my very soul and has reconnected me to the omniscient genesis of all life. I am deeply comforted by its spiritual serenity. Suddenly life interrupted. Questions begin to pop into my head, breaking my connection to the source. These questions have likely plagued mankind for nearly 200 thousand years. Back to the time of the earliest hominids as they explored the Omo Kibish lands of Southern Ethiopia. Looking up towards the heavens too many have wondered: Why am I here, what is my place amongst these cosmos?

These questions come not from the spirit of inner self but rather from our self-serving ego. I begin looking outside myself for the answers, because I didn’t yet understand the truth which lies inherently within us all. Whenever I look up and meditate on the stars, I feel my serenity, as if I am a part of something significant. Outside of this tranquility I feel infinitesimally small and insignificant.

The universe is approximately 15 billion years old. The planet earth? A fledgling couple billion. Our planet is home to tens of thousands of varieties of life and human beings have placed us at the top of the food chain. We have become Gods amongst the beast, and yet our life expectancy barely warrants a blip on the cosmic radar of time. The earth is full of many lifeforms, both flora and fauna which outlive us “Gods.” My ego asks why AM I here? What IS my purpose? Mankind has confidently created many deities in a vain attempt to justify our existence. We have built great temples and monuments to honor these gods all the while sacrificing both humans and animals to appease them. We have written God’s word for Him and followed these guidelines to feel close to Him.

“Thou shalt not kill.” What part of this commandment do we not understand? Since the horrific slaughter of children at the Sandy Hook elementary school there have been over 200 mass shootings in the United States alone! Human beings kill each other indiscriminately. So, what should I hold onto, intelligent design or chaos theory? Have we been created in God’s own image or have we evolved from pond scum? Perhaps it is our actions which speak louder than words. . . A popular theory lately has been that perhaps God created the Big Bang, thus starting the evolutionary process. Alright then, I can live with that.

Imagine if you will that “The Source” (God) set off the big bang which set into motion 15 billion years of creation and then evolution. Maybe we were created in God’s own image; Well, eventually. . .And now presto, here we are!

In 2003 the Human Genome Project successfully sequenced and mapped out the entire human genome by unraveling our DNA. Are we now on the cusp of discovering God’s recipe for life? Perhaps. Sadly, however, this biggest question should not be “what is life,” but rather “what do I do with it?” Is the sole purpose of living and then dying to fulfill God’s will? Are we trudging through life simply to fulfill a prophecy? If you believe this I then also believe you may be a lunatic!

The bible says that “God is love.” It also instructs us to “love thy neighbor as we love ourselves.” Ah! Now that indeed sounds pretty straightforward. “All you need is love,” right John?

And now we have covered (or uncovered) a lot here. Cycling around full circle:

“When life gives you **TIME** make ____ _,”

Personally I don’t give a piddle about “how” life started, but I do cherish that which was given, love of life. This has not always been the case. In fact, I have ashamedly squandered

away most of my life. I would like to examine this a little with you. The following is a "life chart" which I have created. Today's date is March 22, 2019 to keep everything in perspective.

My time alive thus far = 21,286 day

My time spent in prisons = 10,612 days

My time spent as a free man = 10,674 days

My time spent as an addict = 11,141 days

My time spent in sobriety = 10,145 days

I have been imprisoned for 50% of my life as an alcoholic/addict. Let's now put that into perspective.

Average life expectancy

For white, US male, 76 years = 27,740 days

My time which has elapsed = 21,286 days

Approximate Time remaining = 6,454 days

Earliest possible release date

3-20-21 (minus) = -730 days

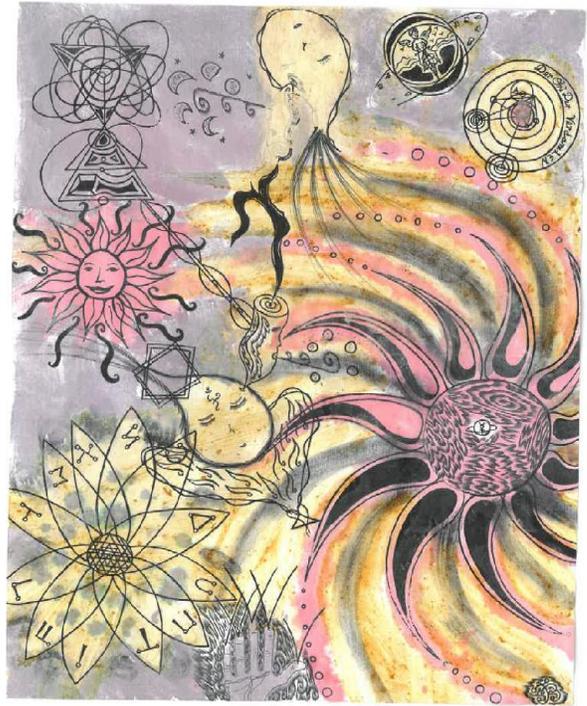
Possible time left in life to life as a free man = 5,724 days

When we do pass away, our tombstone reveals the year in which we are born and the year of our demise. These dates are separated by a small (-) dash. That dash signifies the time to which we have been given to spend over our lives. My dash should be represented by a squiggly line. The greatest human resource is not life itself; it is the time in which we're allotted. The true question should be: "what do we do with our precious time?" For 10,612 of my days I have failed to use that time wisely. I should have been spending it loving all that there is to love, seeing all that there is to see, and hearing, smelling, feeling and tasting all that is out there to enjoy. Our time? Barely a blip on the cosmic clock.

How do you wish to spend your time? Getting high, drunk, envious, jealous, resentful, greedy, sad, lonely, angry, prideful, stubborn, sadistic, hurtful, regretful, mean, selfish, lustful, arrogant?

I have spent much of my time on these exact things. I have alienated myself from my family, my children, my friends and from society. Back in the 1970's I can remember "Freddie Fender" singer: "Wasted days and wasted nights." With this we can fill-in the rest of the theme question:

"When life gives you time make every second count!"



Art by **Jeremy Brown**

A Memorable Adventure

by **James D. Wisner**

Adventures are something everyone should experience. They come in all shapes and sizes. Some last only a few hours, while others can span whole lifetimes. As the old adage goes "it's not about the destination, it's about the journey." As true as that statement is, we tend to forget about enjoying the journey and just focus on getting to the destination. I think the real joy comes from the memories of our adventures. Being able to look back and laugh about our experiences is the real gift. I've had thousands of mini-adventures in my short twenty-eight years. None as grand as Odysseus, or Huckleberry Finn, but memorable all the same. I've climbed mountains, explored caves and abandoned buildings, and trekked through forests. On one such occasion, my cousin Jared and I got lost in the woods near Whiteface mountain in Northern New York. We were on a hunting trip with our great uncle Karl. One of our relatives has a cabin near Whiteface that multiple generations of our family have visited. Back then, they had to use the outhouse regardless of the season. Luckily for Jared and me, there's indoor plumbing now. The cabin (really, it's a house in the woods) was nestled in the trees about a hundred feet off the road. After we unpacked, we harvested a couple of fallen Iron wood trees. My uncle Karl chose these trees and because of their density, they would burn for a long time. The next morning, we ate a hearty breakfast and set out. Uncle Karl drove us around to the back of the property which was about twenty acres. Jared and I's job was to drive any potential deer to my uncle Karl. This was our second attempt of the day; the first one being unsuccessful. We walked to different corners of the area we were hunting in and walked to each other, while pushing deer to our uncle. I got turned around somehow and it was starting to get late. So, I started calling Jared's name. We met up but we didn't know which direction our uncle's truck was in. We didn't have any

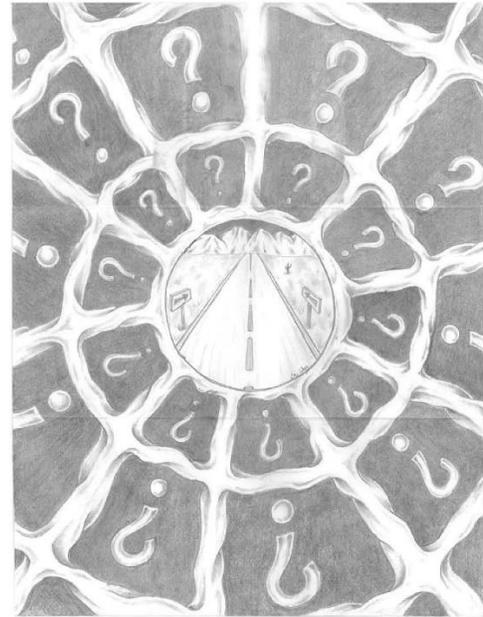
tricks with which to find north or any direction, not that it would have mattered. We were absolutely lost. Jared finally convinces me to follow him. Not much discussion took place; his guess was as good as mine. Now, the new area we were in was sparsely populated. A few cabins with some year long residents but not many. So, we walked through stands of iron wood, pine, maple, picker bushes, and the like. We could see our breath appear and dissipate. We could also see the sun making its way to the horizon. It had been a few hours since Jared and I met up and nothing looked familiar to me. I think we both felt a twinge of fear at that moment. It was dusk, wintertime, and we were in an unfamiliar forest. So, I take the lead this time but there was no logic to my choice of direction; maybe it was a subconscious recognition of habitation nearby or intuition. Maybe they are one and the same. As we pushed through a thick stand of Christmas tree-like evergreens, we finally saw a house and a few vehicles. We walked past the house because no one answered the door. We walk to the next house we see down the road. Since we were hunting, we both had loaded guns in our hands, and it had gotten dark by then. I say to Jared, "I think we should put the guns down before we knock." "Yeah, that would probably be a good idea" he says. I knock on the door and an older gentleman answers. We introduce ourselves and tell him what happened. Once he hears my last name, he says "oh, the Wisner place. I know where that is." I'm thinking "great." Can you tell us where it is? He gives us directions and pauses. He asks us if we would like a ride back home. I tell him "if it's not too much trouble, we would love a ride..." Oh, and we both have guns on your front porch." "you do? I thought you might have spears" he says. He laughs and tells us to make sure the guns are unloaded. He tells his wife he will be back in a minute and walks us to his car. This man was kind enough to give us a ride back to the cabin in the dead of night. I'll never forget the kindness he showed us. We had wandered about three miles from our cabin. This took no time at all in his car. When we walked in the door, we found Uncle Karl sitting at the table with some cards and he said to us "oh, there you are. I was about to call in a search party. Wanna play Uno?"

The Day I Wrecked My Dad's Jeep by Conceta Quijas

I often tagged along with my big burly bearded dad when he'd do his chores around the Ranch. I was just three years old when I remember him putting me in the middle of the seat of the old jeep and jumping into the driver's seat himself. It had snowed all night the night before covering all roads and trails. I slid down into the seat, setting myself down. No seatbelts in those days. My dad pointed to about 25 gear shifts in front of me and told me not to touch any of them or we would wreck. I swear I didn't take my eyes off them the entire drive. Winding and jerking around the mountains I moved back and forth trying not to touch them. Then it happened, gosh darnit --, I touched the gearshifts. I didn't mean to. They just came at my feet, then at my whole body. We slowly stopped and things didn't look right. The gear shifts were on the ceiling. O boy, I wrecked the jeep. I was waiting for the ass whoopin that I was going to get for touching the gear shifts when my dad grabbed me and threw me on his shoulders as we climbed out of the ravine we were in. "I'm sorry I wrecked the jeep Dad." I said as he gave me a piggyback ride down the snowy road smiling from ear to ear not saying a word. Wow, "I

have the best dad in the whole world." I thought. I wrecked the jeep and he wasn't even mad.

It wasn't till years later in my late 20's that I found out I wasn't the cause of the wreck but the snow was.



Art by **Mike Perkins**

by Marvin C. Jones

In 7th grade, my english teacher, Mr Largess, and my math teacher, Mr. McFarland, were loading supplies into the van for our weekend camping trip. It was going to be my first. Not knowing what to expect, I was nervous and apprehensive about going into the Blue Hill mountains of Massachusetts with 9 other students. I was a city kid, I knew nothing about camping but I was also an adventurous type. Once we were all loaded into the van, we drove for an hour to a mountain I never knew existed. When I first laid eyes on it, I thought. . . "uh, oh I've made a mistake." It was a real Mountain and I was supposed to spend the weekend climbing it with two white men who looked just like Grizzly Adams and bunch of other scared city kids. The first day on the trail, I learned that I could eat certain types of Moss off rocks and trees if I ever got lost in the mountains (note to self, stay away from the mountains) and had no food. Somewhere along the way, there was a lodge that we spent our first night in (thank God). I learned to make Trail Mix which back then consisted of M&Ms, peanuts, raisins, and pretzels. The next day, we explored the mountain and looked at the beauty of nature all around us. That evening, we were informed that we'd be sleeping outdoors under the stars (with the wild animals). Yeah, that didn't sit well with most of us. We were scared! We were told we couldn't use flash lights because the bright lights would scare the animals. . . uh, duh, that's kinda what I'd hoped to do! Instead we were given flashlights with a red film over the lens. Turns out we could still see our surroundings using them. I saw my first wild fox using that stupid light. He was big and about 8 feet in front of me, I thought it was a werewolf and promptly turned off my light and stumbled into Mr. Largess. With the lights all extinguished, we laid on our backs and looked up to see a sky filled with bright stars. We learned about the constellations that night; it was beautiful!

The next morning, while it was still dark, we were awakened to watch the sunrise. It was my first and it was magical from so far up. The sky burst with Red & Purple, the air was fresh and crisp and I was happy to have been a part of it all. I ended up going a couple more times. It was nice to get away from city life for a few days. If you've never done it, I suggest you give nature a try -- it will be a memorable adventure.

Spring Fever

by John Naylor

For years, I get these seed catalogues. Some may think it's weird. I plot my favorite types of vegetables. I've never been excellent at growing. Learning about starting seeds is really important. That is if it's not just an excuse to slide off somewhere and smoke. I thought back to being about 13. All over again. Digging up some ground Momma used to plant when I was a toddler. Good dirt. A little more shade than I really wanted. It's at risk for flooding when the fields run off. A gamble, I knew. I think about the lyrics to R.E.M.'s album "Green". I felt connected to the land, the natural world. Such a pure thing. I feel fulfilled even if there wasn't a big success in herbal medicine, vegetables or anything else. It's like the process activates healing for the hurt inside we often overlook or forget about. There was a memory. A log Dad shot at a few times with a .45, a board from a bench where I poured my heart out to both God and my brother Andy. Imagining life apart from these times of solitude was unfathomable. Doing things like everyone else never seemed to be a great success in my life. I knew other kids at Linberg Rd., Church of Christ's youth group in Anderson, Indiana had a garden. Nor the growing knowledge of so many things that are mutually interesting. A pretty involved thought process when hobbies of such a great variety are before a 13 year old young man. My life was different than most around me. This still rings true. We all age. One day, I'll pass away, and we all do. I think God should look to America's Heartland for some great things we hold so dear in our hearts. So many beautiful things just for folks to experience or to manage. Even before they make up their minds to believe in who he is. I still plant things. Here and there. In courts. In the hearts of men and women. Some free, others prisoners. Some things of faith, wisdom or outside perspective. One thing is for sure, spring is coming. Plant a seed, something to grow, or something to grow in others. It's a beautiful thing. You will only get this journey once. And hold who you love close to your heart if you can. The garden of the heart may be all you can grow this year.

"Recollections of Springtime from my Childhood" by Michael Oakleaf

I grew up in the Shenandoah River valley of the Blue Ridge Mountains in northern Virginia. Most years, I was blessed to experience all four seasons and the entirety that each had to offer. My favorite season was winter. I loved the serene beauty of a snowy day, but even as a child, I knew that one could definitely have too much of a good thing. Frequently, I found myself longing and ready for spring when it finally arrived.

Linguists believe the Modern English word "Spring" evolved from the ancient "spreng" which meant "rapid

movement." I cannot think of a better word to describe the season. Often, it began after a final but feeble attempt by winter to persevere. Spring, with her increasingly longer days, warming temperatures and occasional rain showers melted away the remaining snow and ice, especially at the highest elevations or hiding in the darkest shadows. Once-frozen ponds liquified and filled as mountain streams and creeks swelled and coursed more rapidly, feeding the ever-meandering Shenandoah. Seemingly overnight, the natural world came to life.

The nearly monochromatic landscape with somber shades of grey and brown transformed into one filled with all combinations of red, blue and yellow with hues of green interwoven throughout. Everywhere, new flora poked out of the ground. Perennial trees and shrubs sprouted new foliage: leaves that absorbed winter's cache of carbon dioxide and water, producing life-sustaining energy and oxygen. Leaves that provided essential nutrients to all types of organisms in our planet's food web. Leaves that offered shade on the hottest summer days yet to come. Many plants, like the dogwood and redbud trees, or the aromatic honeysuckle bush, began the process of reproduction with attractive flowers in vibrant creams, yellows and pinks. Not to be outdone were the blooms in my Mother's flower beds: yellow daffodils, orange gladiolus, tulips and holly hocks in an array of colors that filled the air with bold and alluring aromas. For some vegetation, flowers were just the opening act for the sweet fruits and berries to follow.

With the flora, came the fauna. Critters of all shapes and sizes crawled forth from their winter burrows, some with young in tow and others in search of a mate. Birds-of-a-feather flock back from warmer, more southern climates to build their nests. Each spring, I sought to see my first robin with its reddish breast, heralding the official return of spring. Much of the season's rapid movement was the result of insects: buzzing bees dancing from flower to flower, spiders spinning webs in search of a meal that glistened in the sun on dew-dampened mornings; and alien-looking caterpillars eating their way through their first incarnation of life, preparing to cocoon and fly into their next. Everywhere I looked, I found life in motion: rabbits, squirrels, and skunks, tadpoles, waterbugs, fish and lizards. Once while digging in the dirt, I unearthed a nest with dozens of baby rattlesnakes. Immediately, they raised their heads and upper bodies out of the dirt. They angrily swayed back and forth in defense of their home and in protest of my accidental intrusion.

Finally, spring was a time for people. Gardens were dug and planted. Lawn furniture, outside toys and yard decorations were pulled from their winter storage, cleaned, and put on display. I enjoyed little more than running barefoot on a lush green carpet of thick grass, or lazing on a warm rock, listening to the creek babel after a cold, quiet winter. Happiness for me was seeing flocks of sheep with their new spring lambs frolicking in pastures. I felt alive breathing in the fresh air, taking in a kaleidoscope of colors, the explosion of movement, the symphony of sound, the bouquet of fragrances that we call spring.

Helping Hand

by Jason Stallcup

Sometimes you just take notice of someone. Something catches your attention, your eye, piques your interest. "Oscar" I'll call him as I've long ago forgotten his name, was a young guy about my own age, mid-20's or so, average height and weight, short dark hair, just another guy on a packed Greyhound bus rolling down a snow-covered highway. My mind was heavy with worry and anxiety. I had a lot to consider and my fellow passengers weren't a priority. But as we crept deeper into the middle of the country the bus thinned out to the point many of us had our own seats. I had already taken notice of Oscar by then just as anyone would look over those who rode along with them. Mind working through my anxiety by distraction. You see, always on the run having just escaped from a psych evaluation, from a county jail having sent me to a state hospital. Having warrants in a couple other states, always a wanted man, (all of which has been resolved, and years gone by) with a few hundred one dollar bills all managed to amass before I got away, nothing else to my name, Oscar, as usual, stood off, alone, to one side during a stop to eat. He always stood off by himself whenever we had stopped for refreshments and to stretch our legs, never even going inside whatever store or fast food joint we happened to be at. This time I listened to that little inner voice and all bent over to introduce myself.

"Man... I would appreciate that, yes" Oscar had replied when I had asked, with a jerk of my thumb toward the brightly-lit, warm restaurant, if he would care to have a meal.

"On me," I added. It was an interesting story I heard that day as we sat at a table and had burgers and fries. Oscar was on his way to upstate New York where he was to spend the next five years at a monastery. Without a penny in his pocket he was crossing the country... to one day, perhaps, be a monk.

Over the years I have sometimes wondered how Oscar fared, curious to know if he made it through the five years and whatever path his life followed. I've wondered, too, if I should've shared my story with him as he shared his with me. For several reasons I wouldn't have, mainly because of the shame of where I knew my path was going. It's the way it is I think at least for many of us, to be shameful of our station in life, or of the wrong path we are on, when with someone who is walking a good, honest path... with a good, honest future ahead of them! One thing I am sure of though, is that "Oscar" remembers the friendly stranger who bought him a meal. Just as I remember those who have fed me during times of hunger as well.. At least the act if not the person. Karma exists. In my case that circle came around, a couple times... We should all help others as often as we can, even in the smallest ways.

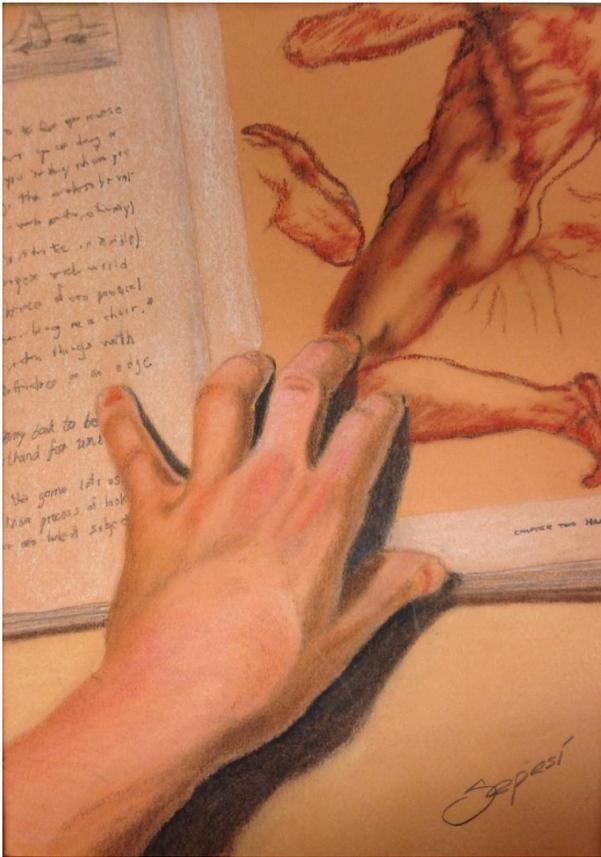
by James D Wisner

A helping hand usually comes when it's most unexpected, but sorely needed. It's one of the many things brothers are good for. I have six of them and one sister. My brothers and I were explorers throughout our younger years. And these adventures would routinely result in trouble for us; but that didn't hinder our desire to experience new things. We lived next to the Black river when we were younger, and this is where our story

is set. It was a beautiful summer day; my younger brother Ben (ten years old) and I (twelve years old) were walking in the river. Attempting to climb every rock face we could find. Our river has both natural and man made arrangements of stone; that to a young boy look like they were made to climb. We arrive at the man made section, here you can climb the wall at varying heights. From six feet to thirty feet tall; we climb the six foot section and walk to the top of the wall. We arrive at a section of the wall that is about thirty feet tall. At the bottom of this enticing piece of wall there is a small spit of gravel and stone at the bottom, surrounded by large jagged pieces of concrete. I'm positive at point that a fall will mean certain death. So of course Ben and I decide to try to climb down. Me being the oldest, have the honor of making the first decent. In my mind I'm James Bond scaling the wall of the villain's fortress. All I need to do to complete this mission is get to the bottom, defeat the villain and climb back up. Piece of cake right? I look over my side. It is nothing like the six foot section we just climbed. The large cracks are non existent. All that is there are small protrusions of rough masonry used to build the wall. To me they looked more than perfect. I swing my legs over the ledge. The foot and hand holds I was so sure on feel small and insubstantial. I work my way down so my hands are on the ledge of the wall. This is the point of no return. Any further and I won't be able to abort the mission. Working slowly, I manage to descend another foot and a half. Then it hits me, I'm stuck. I can't move a muscle for fear of falling to my death. My hold on the wall doesn't seem as sure as it had only a moment ago. "F@#\$! Ben, Ben I'm stuck" I yell. I don't see his face because I can't take my eyes off the wall below cloud my thoughts. I'm sure that I am dead if I don't do something quick. But my hands won't let go of the wall. "Gimme your hand Jim" Ben says to me. "I can't" I yell. I must have hung on to that wall for an eternity, or so it felt. Ben reaches down and grabs my shirt, "I'm going to pull you up, come on." My mind clears a bit and I make a proclamation to the world; "I'm not going to die before I have sex!" I yell. I lunge, Ben pulls and I find myself on top of the wall thanking God Ben was here to save me. We Both agree that this was a stupid idea and head back to the house. We never really talked about that moment on the wall afterwards; but the next time I see Ben I'm going to tell him how lucky I am to have him as a brother.



Art by Mathew Hamann



Art by **James Sepesi** from the Archives

Tricky Business

by **Walter Hart**

I am incarcerated in a very large prison... It has 7 yards, A through G, minimum and maximum level. I am a barber, or shall I say the "Black" barber. Yes, it's 2019 but segregation, in a miniscule way is still alive and kicking... There are 1000 men in this yard and 4 barbers. A black one, a white one, a Mexican one, and an "other," so that every prisoner grooming needs are accommodated. So you can imagine my discomfort when an officer, my building officer, my "Boss" approached me one day while I was cutting hair. I had approximately four men waiting for haircuts and of course all of them were black. The officer pulled me to the side and talked so low that it was close to a whisper, "I got an inmate coming over from the clinic. He's moving into this building, cell 110... two inmates decided to jump on him today... black eye, busted up... these were two young white inmates, the man is white, an old man... 74 years old... he was living in 5 block and supposedly wouldn't take a shower. So they took it upon themselves to jump on him and then toss him in the shower fully clothed... we have put both of them in the hole for aggravated battery, sent him to medical, and how he's on the way to this building, and I'm gonna let you know right now, that nobody better not lay a hand on him!"

Thoughts began tumbling through my mind like tumbleweeds... thoughts like, why didn't he ask the white barber? Why was he telling me this? Prison is a separatist affair sad to say and it's an unwritten, "Take care of your own" rule that we all abide by. The officer continued, "Everybody respects you, you

know the run of this place, nobody would dare cross you... so I am bringing this to you. I need you to cut his hair, clean him up for me" It was more of an order than a request, but the picture became very clear. I asked, "Does he have soap? Clothes? Property?"

"I'll get him fresh clothes and they are bringing his property over as we speak, I can see the look on your face Mr. Hart, but I need it done!" I nodded understanding to him, he walked off and I finished cutting the guys hair, who sat in the chair, I informed the other 4 fellas that shop was closed for about an hour, I had to do something for the officer.

One of the guys spoke up. "I overheard some of what was said, and you mean to tell me that you are cutting a white dude's hair with the black clippers?" I rolled the clippers around in my hand. "These ain't black clippers or white clippers and if you got a problem with it, find somebody else to cut your hair, cause I already let the officer know that I would do it, so that's what I'm gonna do!"

He got up and walked away but the others stayed in their seats, probably more out of curiosity than anything else, either that or they realized that an hour of prison time was actually not that long and they didn't have anything better to do. So one of them grabbed the T.V. remote and turned on a soap opera. "The Young and the Restless." Created for bored housewives, but watched by bored prisoners too. I cleaned my barber tools and swept the area and then I walked Gary, an old, wrinkled, thin white man with clear green eyes, long hair and a scraggly beard. His hair and clothes were damp remnants of being thrown in the shower earlier. His left eye was swollen shut. Kinda purplish... his bottom lip was split... he walked to where the officer called him to, he had a slight limp... his steps were very uncertain as if he were walking on a tightrope... the officer pointed over at me, "Go on over there old timer, Mr. Hart is gonna clean you up!" He came over to our area, the black area, I pointed at my barber chair, "Have a seat young man, let me see what I can do for you." My words brought a smile to his face, but as he sat down I could smell him... a wild animal smell... he needed a bath. I looked him in the eye and introduced myself then asked him what happened. He explained that some guys told him to take a shower, that he was stinking up the place and when he told them he had no soap or shower shoes or deodorant, one guy socked him in the eye knocking him to the ground and continued hitting him as he lay on the ground... another guy joined in the beating, they dragged him to the shower and put the water on. They got a kick out of that, but an eagle-eyed tower officer witnessed the beating, activated his alarm and a small posse of officers came in, handcuffed the suspects and pulled him from the shower floor...

The smell was taking its toll so I excused myself and went to my cell and retrieved a fresh towel, a pair of my celly's boxers which I knew the man could fit, a bar of Irish Spring soap, a pair of shower shoes, a brand new speed stick deodorant, a bottle of shampoo I had been using, 5 top ramen soups, a pouch of tuna, a toothbrush, a tube of close up toothpaste, put it all in a plastic bag and brought it down to the barber area, I pointed at the shower, "Go and get you a shower, everything in the bag is yours, we will find you some clothes by the time you are finished showering, and wash your hair too, brush your teeth... you will not get attacked in this building, nobody will lay a finger on you."

The old man stared at me with those ice green eyes. Trying to find reasoning behind me being nice to him. I stared right back at him. Then saw somebody heading to the vacant shower with their shower bag in their hand. I called them by name and stopped them in their tracks. "Hold up on that shower, I got Gary going in there... you can go after him." The guy nodded his head in understanding and headed to the domino table which was in full swing.

Gary went and took his shower, and while he did, other inmates in the building of all races began approaching me, asking me what was going on with the old, beat up white guy... I explained as best I could... an officer pushed a cart into the building that contained Gary's personal property. I noticed a 13' flatscreen T.V. and a fan right away, but other than that I observed no personal clothing that we are allowed to purchase such as grey T-shirts, shorts, sweat pants, sweat shirts, thermals, (white also allowed) Nor did I see any personal sneakers... also, no commissary items such as hygiene products or food whatsoever!

Someone pointed at a card table where the ramen noodles and pouch of tuna I had donated to the cause sat and asked, "What's up with that?" I explained that Gary appeared to be down on his luck so I gave him a few things I had. I also explained that he needed clean clothes once he got out of the shower, because even though I had said he would get some, often-times people's intentions don't add up to their actions, and the clothes would probably arrive late. If they arrived at all...

Then a strange thing happened... Gary came out of the shower placed the other items and gave him on the table along with the ramen and tuna. He sat down in my chair and as I began to cut his hair, somebody walked up and dropped a few more ramen on the table, another guy brought a bag of chips, someone else a bag of coffee.. Then came some clothes, more soap, a bottle of lotion... from guys doing time, guys who had never met this man in their lives... I mentioned a motto earlier that "we take care of our own" and that is usually along racial lines but not on this day. I continued to cut Gary's hair, tears streamed down his face as more people added this or that to the table. It was now full. A young white dude came over with a pair of Nike sneakers in his hand. They were used but clean. "Try these on old timer, they should fit, and if so throw those old boots away" The shoes fit, the boots went in the trash. I shaved his scraggly beard off last. He looked like a new man... the officer stepped out of his office, and took a full 2 minutes to absorb the scene and what was happening... he didn't have to worry about anybody laying a hand on Gary, we had adopted him, he was one of us now. The officer made eye contact with me and nodded. He mouthed "I owe you one" Gary ended up being a great asset to the building, he was an artist and drew top of the line greeting cards, birthdays, christmas, mother's day, easter, anniversaries, St. Valentine's day, thinking of you, it didn't matter, beautiful cards, one of a kind... people have a way of giving prisoners all kinda different names and titles, but I'd like to add one more to that list... "human"...

Living in prison can be a tricky business. So many different personalities to deal with every day. Never knowing who is in a bad mood. Always trying to avoid the negative vibes. Sometimes just saying 'what's up' can lead to trouble.

I try to look and see who's got a smile on their face and I try to keep one on mine. That's a good start. Although after 35 years in prison I've seen some crazy stuff going on. But I walk on with a smile on my face and I've guarded it all. Hopefully one day I'll be back on the other side of the wall and I'll probably still be walking and smiling. I guess living on either side of the wall is a tricky business.

Close Call

by Michael Sussman

My senior year at Yuma High School was coming to an end, and my girlfriend Angie and I had been invited to a prom party at the house of a mutual friend. Couples were to arrive there early for a picture-taking session, and then we would leave together to go to the dance. Afterward, we would all return to the house, where we would play games and watch movies until morning.

Angie and I had been dating for six months and we shared a lot in common-- for example, we both loved to sneak out and go on romantic adventures together. As Yuma is located in the southwestern armpit of Arizona and is surrounded by desert, our options as teenagers were limited, but we made do. Some mornings we would drive out to the Mesa del Sol golf course and sit on a random fairway to watch the sunrise; some days we would pull out a map, find a nearby small town we'd never been to, and drive there so we could explore it; some nights we would go for a drive and look for a particularly lonely or interesting colored light off in the far distance, so we could try to make our way there and find out the light's purpose. Really, we just loved spending time together as best friends.

On the day of the party, our parents had given permission for both of us to attend, but Angie and I were busy hatching other plans. We had spied a rare opportunity to spend the whole night together, just the two of us, and we felt obligated to take advantage of it. So we came up with the brilliant idea to go camping.

Angie had never been camping before, but my dad had taken our family out many times into the desert surrounding the Gila Mountains. We would go on a day hike, roast marshmallows over the campfire, and then sleep at night in a tent, or sometimes in our sleeping bags under the stairs. What this meant, of course, is that I had access to all the camping supplies Angie and I would need.

We departed from my house, telling my parents that we were heading over to the prom party early to hang out. Our shorts-and-t-shirt attire was easily explained by the assurance that we were going to change over at our friend's house, and we made a big show of packing up our formal dress wear. My dad had given me permission to use the SUV, a green GMC Jimmy; what he didn't know was that Angie had spent the last twenty minutes pulling camping gear out of our storage shed and passing it to me over the backyard wall, while I used my tetris skills to load the back of the Jimmy.

Our first stop was the grocery store to purchase hot dogs, chips, marshmallows, and other junk food, and to fill up our five-gallon water jug. Then we headed north out of the city in

search of a nice camping spot. I had never really paid attention to where my dad drove when we went camping, but I figured it wasn't rocket science: you drive until you hit desert, you find a flat place without any cacti, and you set up camp.

After a time, the two-lane highway bent eastward and with the setting sun blinding me in the rearview mirror, I realized it was already four-thirty. We needed to find a spot soon while we still had daylight.

I spied a likely-looking dirt road and turned onto it, mentally crossing my fingers. We were lucky! The desert terrain on both sides was amazingly flat: no large, unpleasant rocks, and little sign of cacti-- or any desert flora, for that matter. I drove for another five minutes before turning off at an indiscriminate location, pulling forward another fifty feet or so and parking. Time to set up.

Angie was busy digging the fire pit and I was pounding stakes for the tent when I noticed three vehicles in the distance, driving toward us across the desert plain. One of them had flashing lights. As they approached, we heard a voice yell over a loudspeaker: "Stop what you're doing immediately! Do not move!"

It turned out that Angie and I had ventured onto the Yuma Proving Grounds, and there were unexploded bombshells and other ordnance all around us. At any moment, either one of us could have struck paydirt.

The military police took out IDs, ran background checks, and quickly realized we were two dumb teenagers. All I remember saying was, "Please don't tell our parents!" They didn't, but they escorted us off the property and admonished us to never return. We didn't.

But we did go to the prom party. :)



Art by Jason Yattew from the Archives

“Still Here” by Scott A. Madoulet

At 46 years old, divorced, relapsing, hiding the full extent of my sickness, in the midst of a weeks-long binge, suffering from

self-loathing and severe depression, I intravenously injected one full grain of cocaine into my arm. This resulted in a 25-minute long grand-mal seizure and an out-of-body experience that I will never, ever forget.

As I desperately clung to the nearest piece of reality, a closet door, to keep from falling, the seizure increased in intensity. As my arms uncontrollably jerked back and forth, I repeatedly smashed the edge of the solid oak door into my face. At the same time, I became dissociated from my body. I felt this great calm and began seeing myself from above myself, watching as I finally released the door, fell to the ground, and flopped like a fish on hot dock boards, doing the herky-jerk on the hallway floor.

Once the seizure stopped, I tried to raise my head and get up — you see, I wasn't afraid or even concerned — I still felt calm. But the tremors started again, so I dragged and slithered my way to the front room and crawled up onto the couch. After a few minutes, I had a smoke. After that, I got up and had a beer from the fridge. I swore off coke, at least until the next time. I never did go to the doctors.

Ironically, one year later, I experienced this some out-of-body sensation. Although I felt nothing, I became disassociated from myself. Drug free but under extreme emotional duress, it was as if I was again outside, my body, looking down on the sentencing I was receiving. Head hung low, I watched the drama unfold. With my back to the audience, I witnessed the hate and smug satisfaction of my accusers. I deserved this. I did, and I do.

I'm still here, but I'm different now. Six years down on 15, I've earned my Associates Degree, taken some programming, and am working to pay off my LFO's. Somehow, I've found that calm again again. It's alright here, you know!?!

by Al Coleman

I was nine or ten years old. My family was staying at my aunt's house in Cocoa Beach, Florida, for some kind of miniature family reunion. We didn't get to see my cousins that often because they lived in North Carolina and we lived in Florida, so my brother and I were having a great time playing with them. We were also allowed to stay up past our bedtime, which was a rare treat. I took full advantage of this privilege, staying up until very late talking to my older cousin, even though I was exhausted by the day's activities.

I remember being told that there was a special surprise that next day, but these surprises were not usually that special so I didn't spend much time speculating on it. Probably just pancakes for breakfast or something, I thought.

The next morning, though the underwater haze of half-consciousness, I hear my dad bark "Get up if you are going to eat breakfast" or something to that effect. It was like five in the morning, pitch black outside, and of course I was groggy from staying up so late the night before. Definitely more tired than hungry, I listened to the others eating breakfast down the hall as I floated back to slumberland.

A little while later - maybe minutes, maybe an hour - I hear my dad's harsh voice telling someone to "leave him be - his worthless ass is still in bed," loud enough so he could be sure I heard it.

There was no one in the world who could put more contempt or disappointment into the word “worthless” than my father.

A few minutes later, I heard him say loudly, “Forget it - he is too lazy to even go to Disney World.” I remember thinking what a transparent ploy this was to trick me into getting up for breakfast I didn't even want. I tossed and turned a little bit before finally looking in my bag for some clothes to slip on. I was moving very slowly - it was still dark outside, for crying out loud - who eats breakfast this early?!

Gradually, I noticed that all of the voices and bustle that I had been hearing had disappeared, replaced by an eerie silence. And that's when it hit me - the special surprise the adults were hinting at the night before. Could it actually be...

I tore down the hallway half-dressed with my shoes in my hand. There was no one in the dining room, the kitchen, or the living room. My stomach dropped. Right then, the front door opened and one of my aunts and my mom walked in.

“Where is everyone?” I asked, my voice trembling in fear.

“They just left. They are going to Disney World,” my mom answered with a hint of pity. I didn't believe her. I couldn't believe her. I ran past her to the driveway that was full of cars the night before. There was only one car left. Right there, as the sun had just begun to rise, I fell to the concrete and sobbed.

I spent the longest day of my life stuck in the house nearly alone. I couldn't believe anyone could be so cruel, taking all of the kids but me. Yes, I didn't get up immediately, but I didn't think Disney was a real possibility. We had only been once before, and I don't think my parents liked Disney. We didn't have a lot of money as well, so I couldn't take the prospect seriously. I was so disappointed.

I remember when everyone got back that night, laden with souvenirs and stories of Space Mountain. My dad looked at me and said, “I guess you will do what I tell you next time.” to him, this was an important life lesson. And it was. But I don't want to think I learned the lesson he wanted me to. As you can tell I have thought about this a lot since then. On one hand, I see how spoiled I was. No one is entitled to go to Disney World. But on the other hand, I just see what feels like cruelty and unfairness. I think maybe both could be true.

Many Close Calls by Nate Lindell

Before I was two years old, before my neural structures even organized themselves enough to potently manifest the qualities of my “soul,” my mature personhood, I'd been hospitalized with pneumonia four times. I had epilepsy, took phenobarbital, then tegretol until I was 10 and my seizures stopped. A feral Great Dane picked me up by my stomach and carried me off to eat me when I was about 7 (my collie, Laddie saved me, but was so tore up himself that he was shot)--still have the scar from that. Around age 6 a truck ran over me when I was sledding, then--the driver was so nervous--back up over me; the

doctor said I'd never walk again. And my mom gave her best effort to kill me a couple times--still have scars from that too, can't raise my right eyebrow all the way. Maybe worst of all, when I was living in Butte, MT, the little red-head next door tried to stab me when I tried to kiss her (all loopy from pain pills post-sledding accident.)

It. Has been. Rough!

And all that was before age 10!

Then there's prison. Fast forwarding to Oct 8, 2018. I was stabbed in my head from behind with a knife (chopped out of the steel in a cell) that'd make Crocodile Dundee pause. Lucky me the tip was too slender, the steel too soft and my skull too hard, so he only severed one artery and caused 32 staples (more internal sutures) worth of damage before the tip bent, preventing deep penetration when he stabbed me elsewhere. Fortunately, I didn't fall out from sudden blood loss until I was able to kick him in his liver then his ribs real good, making him back off. That was close!

Probably most prisoners reading this are already bored: “Been there; had that happen.” And I'm not bragging; I'm not proud that life has been a gauntlet for me! Anyone who thinks that such is cool, go ahead and have these scars, these tendencies to overreact, this panic when in new places or around strange faces!

The point I seek to make with this essay, a point I've sought to make before, is one that needn't be made to those who actually care about people but one that I realize will never be grasped by those who condemn and refuse to understand people. That point is that most prisoners have been punished (for sins they didn't commit) long before they came to prison and the carefully concocted punishments that are de rigueur in America's prisons are, at best, futile.

When pushed in a corner, I've cut and stabbed too. I'm not bragging. The violence I experienced prepared me, like a dog tortured to prepare him to fight: who's really bad, the dog or the dog's trainer?

No thanks to prisoncrats, I've committed to not using violence: my contribution to the revolution; my resistance. I refuse to contribute to the cycle of mayhem that is relied on by ----s to feed The Beast. This commitment is a struggle, but what helps me endure are the handful of dear friends I've made in and out of prison and my wish to spare others the sadism I've witnessed/experienced.

Love to all you P.E. volunteers and participants! :)

by Jeremy Brown

Well, I've had a lot of close calls with The Grim Reaper, The Angel of Death if you will. At 5 years old I jumped off a stairwell into an above ground pool, slipped, fell off backwards and knocked myself out on the concrete. At 10 I was doing tricks on my Etnies skateboard when a drunk driver swerved and almost hit me, before he did someone pushed me into a ditch and saved me from becoming squash. At 12 I found some beer and got drunk spun around in circles and knocked myself out on a coffee table corner and did it again a few months later. I lost a gallon of blood together both times and ended up with multiple stitches on my right eyebrow. When I was 14 I passed out with a Tetanus shot and almost went into a coma shortly thereafter, after hitting my head on a counter. When I was born, I had a hard time coming

out of the womb. I was 11 pounds 2 ounces. They c sectioned me out and said I had my left fist in front of my face saying I looked ready to fight the world! Skip a lot of years and at 24 I was almost sentenced to Death Row for a murder. Due to lack of evidence, no eye witness, and a great legal team I was able to mitigate and lessen my sentence. I can say with surety I've had my share of close calls and some Force is protecting me for the time being. I'm sure more close calls are on the way but with my fist in front of me I'm ready to face these challenges Fearlessly As we all should. I mean, life would be a boring commercial of perfection without these close calls, I like it rough and tough and sometimes you get it underneath your nails dirt and mud. I'm okay with that. As long as I have soap and a hot shower to get all the shit off, I'm straight.

Picture Theme Writing - I know a picture is worth a 1000 words, but in this case please try to keep it to 800. Some of you respond well to word themes, but others find pictures more evocative. Here is a listing of upcoming monthly picture themes. If you send in a submission we will send you a packet with all the writing we receive on the topic, minus any writing we think might get the packet censored by prison officials or writing that is meant to generate hate against people who you think are different from you based on religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation. There is enough hate in this world and in prisons and we don't want to increase the anguish in this troubled world.

After the listing of upcoming picture themes there is a selection of some themes from previous months. Send in your own submission to get a full copy of each month's theme essays.

New Theme Pictures and Deadlines



Due 3/1/20

"The legal books you send me have helped me and so many inmates. Thank you." – How is PE affecting you? summer 2019 survey response

"...an outlet for anger, confusion confinement" – How is PE affecting you? summer 2019 survey response



Due 4/1/20



Due 5/1/20



Due 6/1/20



Due 7/1/20



Due 8/1/20



Due 9/1/20

Selected responses from previous picture cues



“Sentinels” by Brian Fuller

When the first Sentinels appeared overhead, people were shocked to say the least. There was widespread panic about government surveillance and invasion of privacy. Nobody knew for sure just how sophisticated those communication and imaging systems were. The media wasn't helping matters either. With folks talking about weaponization and martial law, a certain amount of paranoia was understandable.

After all, they had been covertly developed as a joint venture between defense contractors and private industry. Necessity may be the mother of invention, but it's a downright shame that it took a sash of wildfires and hurricanes for the powers that be, to finally release to the public what they'd worked on in secret for all those years. A perfect hybrid of old world and new age technologies; these “drone-dirigibles” sort of had everybody scratching their heads, saying “why didn't they do this sooner.” They were a natural blend of efficiency and versatility.

The earliest prototypes tested by the military were many simple unarmed aerial vehicles which closely resembled the famous “GOODYEAR or FUJI” blimps seen over football games. However, it didn't take long before an exponential paradigm shift in both design and manufacturing technology started producing behemoths that rivaled the size of the legendary “Gnoff Zeppelin” from a century ago. It wasn't simply the dimensions of the thing that had people scared. Their futuristic look reminded folks of the huge airships from movies like “AVATAR.” There were even a few misinformed unfortunate souls who swore they were alien spacecraft.

Limited orders were paced by the coast guard, forest service, and F.E.M.A. It didn't take long for everybody to notice the proactive approach to problem solving was saving countless lives. If an ounce of prevention is truly worth a pound of care, then these vessels were certainly paying off in spades. The common sense mindset of already having disaster relief and emergency management systems in place before a catastrophe, is something we've needed for a very long time.

Now, instead of wildfires exploding in size threatening lives and property, they can be dealt with before they get out of hand. With extended deployments enabling them to be positioned over high risk zones ahead of time, response times are dramatically reduced. Traditional aircraft are limited in both accuracy and capacity for extinguishing fires. A Sentinel can approach an area slowly at low altitude using camera guided water cannons and flame retardant. Thermal imaging allows them to view areas obscured by smoke.

Their performance as a humanitarian relief platform proved itself to be indispensable in the aftermath of hurricane Xavier. Ejection pod systems dropped food, water, medicine and every other imaginable necessity. When speakers instructed rescue baskets were lowered by winch cable, and people actually thought there was a pilot on board giving instructions. Once they found themselves safely inside the aircraft, a video cam-link system allowed them to speak with controllers. This interaction with those being rescued provided valuable intelligence in real time about those still trapped in devastated areas.

Information is interfaced through an amazing network of advanced systems. Satellite impute, ground controller, and artificial intelligence are integrated to assure the highest level of performance. Each Sentinel has the capacity to function autonomously, as well as come together en masse to cover complex problems over large areas. Homeland Security and local law enforcement groups alike have repeated having success

stories in threatening terrorist attacks and all manner of criminal endeavors.

Tragedy was narrowly averted when a senator's daughter was found deep in the woods at night. The Sentinels forward looking infrared sensors were able to spot her and her kidnapper and track them until law enforcement could intercept them. Still another instance was when a congressman himself was pulled from frigid waters after his boat capsized in a storm.

It's sad that it takes these near misses happening to our aristocratic elite before they're willing to lobby lawmakers for change. Everybody has known for a long time that the lives of the general public take a back seat to special interest dollars filling politicians' pockets. Social justice, public safety, and human rights are nice catch phrases during election campaigns. But once they're in office they're blinded by the corruption of power and manipulation and deception become business as usual.

"Floating" by Steven P. Arthur

It's a recurring dream. I'm falling, the dry wind whips past me. I look around and see nothing but the darkening blue sky and the setting sun. Even below me there is nothing. Just more sky. I feel no sense of impending doom. I'm falling toward nothing, not the ground, I'm just falling. Time passes and I continue to fall. Minutes stretch into hours and days into weeks. I just fell. The setting sun stays setting. It becomes neither darker or lighter. If not for the wind jostling me around, whipping my hair and clothes around, I would say I'm paused. Like a movie waiting to be restarted. I am fully clothed: shoes, socks, pants and shirt. But, I have no parachute; my fall is not a jump. There is no fear, I continue to fall. I turn, twist, fly like a bird, and roll over. But, nothing changes. I have no control, but of my own body and thoughts. I close my eyes and let go.



"The Fox and the Egg" by Franklin Lee

Just past the Miller's farmhouse, on the edge of a small forest, lived Mr. and Mrs. Fox. The Foxes, with their lush red fur and little black paws, got along quite well with their closest neighbors. Farmer Miller, his wife, and two young daughters, were delightfully content with the wildlife near the farm. Every night,

they would leave out scraps for Mr. and Mrs. Fox. While Mrs. Fox was satisfied with the scraps, Mr. Fox had secretly wanted more.

"What else would you want?" asked Mrs. Fox one night, gnawing on a leaf of tossed lettuce. "We have everything we need. Good food, good neighbors..."

But Mr. Fox was not satisfied. At night, while Mrs. Fox collected their nightly scraps, Mr. Fox, seemingly innocent, wandered past the Miller's house, behind the barn, and into the chicken coop. What he discovered there was a large, white egg. Unable to carry it, however, he used one of the children's old wicker doll carriages and rolled the egg into it. Just as slyly as he entered, Mr. Fox rolled out of the coop, past the barn and house and back into the safety of the forest.

When Mrs. Fox returned from collecting their dinner, she was surprised to see a giant egg in a wicker doll carriage. "What is it?" She asked, having never seen an egg that size before.

"It's an egg!" exclaimed Mr. Fox proudly. "The farmer has a chicken house next to the barn. See, we no longer have to eat scraps anymore. We can feast on all the eggs we want from their chicken house."

Mrs. Fox was not impressed. "The farmer and his family have been kind to us. They give us food and don't chase us away. Why do we need to steal from them?"

"Mrs. Fox," he belittled her. "You do not see the big picture. They feed us scraps, but keep their prized eggs for themselves. If they were truly kind, they would also share their eggs, too."

Mrs. Fox did not see quite like Mr. Fox did, but did not argue anymore. She left him with his big egg. Sitting with the wicker doll carriage, Mr. Fox tried to think of a way to enjoy his new treat. Climbing into the carriage, he tried to bite the shell, but it was much too hard. He pawed at it, but the shell was much too smooth. Growing tired, Mr. Fox curled around his prize, dreaming of the golden treasure inside.

Early the next morning, Mr. Fox was awakened by crackling coming from the shell. Leaping out of the carriage, he waited for the next surprise. A new born chick would be more satisfying than a gooey yolk, he thought.

"Cheep, cheep." A yellow head popped through the cracked shell. Mr. Fox's eyes grew wide with delight. All the possibilities with his own chicken... a new idea sparked in his head.

"What is that noise?" Mrs. Fox exclaimed as she climbed out from their oak tree burrow. "It's... it's a chick!"

"It hatched," Mr. Fox stated triumphantly.

"Are you going to eat it?" she asked. "It's awfully big for a baby chicken."

"I have a better idea!" Mr. Fox stated enthusiastically. "If the farmer can raise chickens, we can too. With our very own chicken, we can eat all the eggs we want!"

As before, Mrs. Fox did not argue, but took no part in Mr. Fox's scheme. Each night, they collected their scraps and Mr. Fox fed his chicken. And the chicken grew... and grew... and grew. So big, in just a few weeks, it barely fit in the wicker doll carriage. Refusing to let his chicken roam free, Mr. Fox pushed his chicken everywhere. Soon they had to make multiple trips to feed his baby.

Mr. Fox's chicken soon was no longer a baby, but it still demanded all of his attention. At night when it was hungry, it

would let out a loud “HONK” until he pushed the carriage to the scrap pile. If Mr. Fox ignored his chicken, it pecked his head. If Mr. Fox was angry at it, it bit his tail. Mr. Fox pushed his chicken everywhere it wanted to go, but he knew he would eventually get his reward.

One night, the Miller family were out early on their porch, when the seven year old Miller girl cried out in delight to her mother. “Look Mommy,” she said, pointing to Mr. Fox pushing the wicker doll carriage. “That daddy fox is pushing that big, boy goose in my old baby carriage.”

“Duck and Fox Picture Theme” By Lorraine Kenitzki

Of all the strange things to see on any given day!
 What was this fox doing anyway?
 The goose was so much bigger than the predator.
 I really don't know what to say.
 Did the fox expect the fowl to play?
 Or were its eyes too big for its own stomach
 Thinking it could catch such prey?
 Maybe there's eggs in the pram,
 Or the goose is just a plastic sham?
 I wonder if the fox knew what to do,
 If it ended up with the goose anyway?
 On its tippy toes
 in the back
 Pulling itself up so high
 to give a look see
 Inside.
 Or was this part of a movie set,
 For some Narnian film show
 Oh boy! I'll just bet,
 All my grandkids will want to know,
 What drives this lil' fox so!
 To take its life into danger,
 With people's carriages,
 on city streets!
 With human beings,
 and their precious baby seats!
 Was it lured by the smell of milk from the baby's bottle?
 Or was it some anthropomorphic moment, and I thought the fox
 would open up full throttle?
 Taking stroller, goose, baby, and all,
 Down the sidewalk to a shopping mall?
 Pretty and clean.
 Like a baby's carriage should be,
 I really never ever thought I would see,
 Or even a fox pushing a stroller!
 Or even, a fox taking a peek inside,
 This infant's roller!
 Guess I'll just have to look around me,
 This sight right before me?
 Or has someone put whiskey
 In my coffee,
 Or LSD!

“You seem to open my mind to clearer thinking. To focus on a positive to immerse myself in it versus the prison block/yard

*“norms”, stronger mental health.” – How is PE affecting you?
 summer 2019 survey response*



“Girl with Pail Picture Theme” by Cesar Hernandez

Nothing in this world is absolutely still. Everything is moving and changing. Due to impermanence, our happiness can't last forever - it can turn into suffering at any moment.

Anything impermanent is subject to falling apart. Falling apart is not happiness. Therefore what is impermanent is said to be suffering.

Once, there was a young and headstrong princess, pampered by her father the king. No matter what she wanted, the king would do whatever he could to fulfill her wishes. One day it was raining hard, and when the rain spattered on the puddles in the palace yard, it made lots of bubbles, which fascinated the princess so much that she told the king, “I want a garland of water bubbles to adorn my hair.”

The king answered, “That's impossible.”

The princess insisted saying that if she didn't get what she wanted she would die. The king was frightened and convened all the artisans in the kingdom, commanding them to make a garland of water bubbles for the princess. Many young artisans were at their wit's end and extremely anxious for fear of the princess's disappointment.

One old craftsman claimed that he could do what she wanted on the condition that the princess be his consultant. The king was overjoyed and sent his daughter to the craftsman's workshop. The craftsman told the princess, “I can make the garland, but I can't tell nice water bubbles from ugly ones. Please bring me the ones you want, and then I will make them into a garland for you.”

The princess happily agreed and went to choose her water bubbles, but even after trying for a long time, she couldn't catch a single one. Exhausted, she turned around and ran into the palace to tell her father:

“Water bubbles are very pretty, but when I try to catch them, they don't even last a moment. I don't want them anymore.”

Suffering is rooted in clinging. The more deeply you realize the law of impermanence, the less overwhelming your suffering will be. If, for instance, you understand the impermanence of life, you can recover from the devastation of a loved one's death.

The moon waxes and wanes, dim and bright; likewise, people can become happy or sad, together or separated. This is the law of impermanence, and nobody can transcend it. If you understand this, your mind will open, and change won't drive you to despair.

“Water Fight” by Jack Simpson

I love the hot summer days. The feel of the hot breeze on my sunburnt skin. Who has time to think about skin cancer at the age of twelve?

My brother is older than me by at least eight years. He is a holy terror. If playing fair is in the game, you can count him out. His idea of fair play is to make sure you suffer, and I mean hard.

Our backyard is level by no means. I had to run uphill, blinded by the burst of water, only to slip and fall to his mercy. There is no telling how much water is wasted. The worst part of this is, we had to explain to our father why we had the water running for so long.

When you are young, nothing sinks in about how much things cost, that our parents paid the bills. All that really mattered was that we were having fun.

I thought the coast was clear. Did I ever figure that wrong? My bucket was full to the point of having a hard time toting it. My face had just breached the corner of the house. It felt as if a monsoon hit me all at once. I couldn't see anything. It felt as though my eyelids were peeled back and my hair left its home, never to return. On my knees and begging him to stop only brought more trouble. The harder I begged, the more he let me have it. I've been told nothing is tighter than a brother's love. Boy did he love his younger brother. If this was his way of showing love, I believe we both would have done better fighting it out. It didn't take long before our mother stepped in.

“You know your father will be home soon. This mess had better be cleaned up,” she said. Nobody talked back to Mama. She had our utmost respect. Our mess was cleaned up and on the back porch sat a bucket of water. I will not lie, it was mine. That was just in case he tried another sneak attack.

What is that old saying? “Fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me”. I must have been the most shamed person in our family. He sure got me more than twice and I was talking about just anything.

The door opened slowly. Was he ready for a truce? Deep down my mind had second thoughts. I grabbed the bucket of water. When I turned to give a full roundhouse motion, the water had already started to leave the bucket. If only you saw the fear on my face. It was too late to stop or turn.

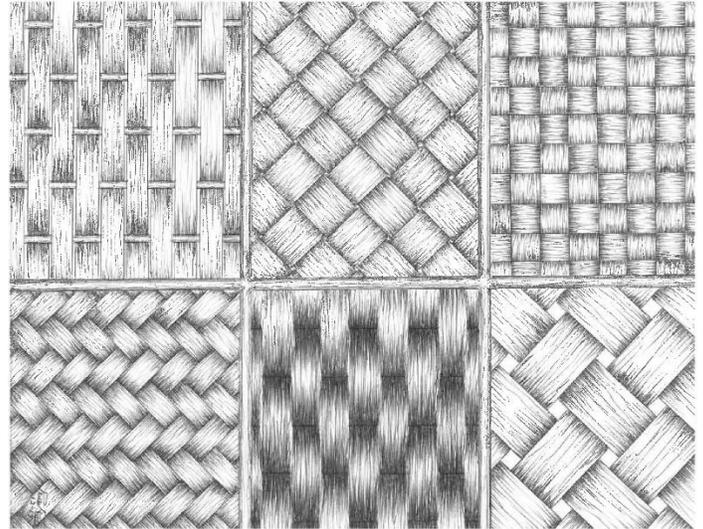
Our dad caught the full force of water and looked madder than a wet hen. The thing that caught me off guard was that my brother was just standing to his left about ten feet away. One of the biggest grins on his face.

I knew I was in deep trouble. Dad was soaked from his head to his waistline. All I could do was say I was so sorry. I was expecting more from him other than what he gave me. Slowly he went inside. My brother was laughing so hard. I wanted to do something. My bucket was still in my hand. The water flowed easily into it. As I turned to throw it on him, there stood our father with a bucket full of water. He looked at me and grinned. Now, I have seen that grin before.

We both nodded at the same time. My brother was soaked from head to toe. That was funny to Dad. My brother was

going out on a date in less than twenty minutes. He had to change clothes and start all over again.

My dad laughed at him and said, “Don't mess with the man, who is the master of water fights.” We both laughed as he went inside. I hugged my dad and thanked him for standing by me. His only comment was: “That is what fathers do.”



Art by **Phillip Rath**

“Not a Dry Eye” by Michael L. Thomas

During a rough spell in the relationship between my ex-wife and I, it was a constant debate and verbal battle over my daughter, our daughter, and who was to be the custodial parent. My 10 year old daughter, who at the time seemed to be the older adult in this situation, often felt we were acting childish, and that her love and time could be equally spread between my ex Julie and I.

Although our daughter was right, as adults we felt that we needed a legal authority to decide who would be the top dog, custodial parent, and who and what shots could be called when it came to our daughter. You would have thought we were in a divorce proceeding attempting to decide who received a prized ocean liner or yacht that we both purchased equally. It was our child for Christ sake, and so after close to a few thousand in court costs, a magistrate decided I would get weekends until my daughter Lisa turned 18.

So there we were, she and I, Mutt and Jeff and our beloved weekends. Imagine a 10 year old with little to no rules to get to bed early, no dietary constraints, unlimited ice cream, movies, the mall to shop for Barbies and Video Games, frequent sleep-overs at my condo for her and her BFFs (Best Friends Forever). Not to mention allowing her to crank loud pop and rap music in the Dodge Ram pick up truck that I'd often take her on drives to putt-putt golf, parks or around town for daddy and daughter time just because we needed to bond and free her from the confines and constraints of weekdays with her mother. Hitler was the secret name she and I gave her mother. And after our routine, legally sanctioned by the judge, became routine, every Friday after work I'd pick up my daughter at her mother's at 6:30 PM. My work as a construction carpenter took me to various work locations doing various forms or stages of construction with many mandates. One week, such a deadline was imminent, and with my precious timeline to pick up my daughter Lisa at stake, I

reluctantly vied to work overtime to complete a job with such deadlines as many construction projects have. Unfortunately, and despite working with as much speed and accuracy as I could, I finally got off from work at 8:30, two hours late and a half hour drive away from her mother's home.

You know the saying, "better late than never"; never wanting to disappoint my precious little gem, I stormed through weekend traffic this Friday to pick up my beloved daughter. Upon arrival at my ex-wife's home, my daughter answers the door. As she opens the door, my ex is screaming,

"Where have you been?!" And now my daughter is bawling in tears as she spreads her arms with her cute summer dress and sandals to give her dad a hug. I say to her, "Sweetheart, what is wrong?" She says she thought I got hurt and wasn't coming, or something. I quickly explained to her that I had to work late. But as I pulled into the driveway of her mom's house, I noticed a bucket and being as though it was so late it didn't cross my mind that my daughter had prepared to help me wash my work truck as we often did before our weekend outings.

After addressing my wife, my daughter and I headed out and I told the ex I'd have Lisa back Sunday afternoon as usual. My daughter, still sniffing with tears in her eyes, followed my lead out of the door towards my truck. She said,

"Daddy, would you still like to wash your truck?" I said,

"No, sweetheart, it's a bit late." Well, to my surprise she began crying again, and so I quickly changed my tune. I got the hose from the side of the house and wet down my truck. My daughter soon used the bucket of soapy water she had anticipated using to wash my truck earlier and began sponging down the truck's body. Then all of a sudden, splash! My daughter sneaks around the tailgate of the truck and dowses me with the soapy sponge. I then sprayed her a bit and chased her with the hose. I turned my headlights on because she tries to hide in front of the truck away from the hose's spray. I circle to cut her off at the hood and splash! She soaks me with the suds and water, as she is now laughing her rear off as she says,

"I got ya daddy!" At this point, I rush to her and pick her up to hug her. We both are now crying, laughing. Now there's not a dry eye or anything else dry as we cheerily complete the task of our bonding ritual before we go for a cruise followed by Pizza Hut, a late movie, and a few video games before my daughter decides it's night night. That little ten year old, now an adult, is still my pride and joy. And often when I sit back and reminisce on the time we shared and quirky moments that bonded us closely, I begin to tear up and once again, there's not a dry eye.

"Hearing other stories/statements have also helped ease the mental anguish of being here and away from loved ones." – How is PE affecting you? summer 2019 survey response'

"Human warmth, sense of worth, participation in a dynamic platform, social justice, prison reform" – How is PE affecting you? summer 2019 survey response



IDITAROD: DAY FOUR **by Thomas Farlow**

Cold. I would have to wake up to this today. Cold and wet. Which one was it? Wiping my eyes to run the sleep away, I raised the slits just as a glob of pink wetness hit my cheek and shoved its way up, over my eyes, across my brow, and—I'm sure—melted into strands of my hair. Yuck!

Burrowing my head into the soft, warm fabric of my sleeping bag to dry my now accosted face, I reopened my eyes to see a smiling grin on Gamba's dark face. Good morning to you too, cute stuff.

That was Gamba though. He was my ever present sidekick and support, since he was old enough to come home with me. I've owned a lot of dogs (still do), but Gamba stood out from all of the others. He wasn't alpha like Viola, my ferocious female leading the pack. Usually my dogs would find ways into my heart in groups, always bum-rushing me as I came home for some love and attention. When it was all doled out and time to call it a day, they would retreat to their respective beds and sleep in contented bliss.

Not Gamba.

The first night he came home, he snuck into my room and managed to climb into my bed. When the morning came, feeling the fluffy warmth surprised me. It's been that way, sharing the king size bed, the past four years now. I like to think he assumes he can always curl up next to me by this leisure at bedtime. All four of them in the tent was a community experience. This year's Iditarod is my new team's first: Viola and Gamba, who I've mentioned already, accompanied by Loran and Yagi. They seemed to work well together so far. We had a good run going yesterday. Then, Mother Nature reared her ugly head with white out conditions.

I didn't spot the clouds until Yagi kept glancing to the Southwest. I looked and saw the rolling clouds hurtling fast; snow covered survivors were the only way we were going to make it through. I pulled up at a clearing among some trees on the trail to

set up our camp. I had planned on going twice as far, but I can only hope the other competitors have the same delays. While I set up the tent and secured the sled, Yagi's nervousness had the other three fidgety like the agitated two-year olds all lathered up over a change in what we trained for. The shelter went up frantically to ease the tension and we all slept snugly warm like a pack congregated in a cave den.

When I unzipped the flap, I was greeted with the blinding, snow-white powder that covered everything, light rebounding off the flakes in every shade possible of yellow and white. If the Aurora Bealis had its yin to its yang, this would be it. I looked at the trail and said..."What trail?"

Six-feet deep in every direction obliterated the race trail. Loran was going to have her work cut out today. Due west today until we hit something familiar.

I'm going to run them in a side-by-side formation to start today. We need to haul ourselves out of this mess, and perhaps those behind us need a trail to follow, also. If we meet on a road, I'll switch them to the traditional nose-to-tail.

Going to stow this journal with all the gear and head out. God bless us today.

Riley, 2018

"The Pack" by Douglas Knakmuhs

We all know that there are certain absolute truths within our world. If you punch me in the face, it's gonna hurt. Without air breathing, you're gonna die. If you step in dog poop, you're not gonna like it.

One thing that I believe to be true is that humans are always gonna be animals. As such, we are always gonna have that "pack mentality" that we all know so well. I believe that same mentality causes so much pain in our world. Racism, feudal wars, economic repression, gender bias, and the whole "Donald Trump Era" proves that humans have always lived within a "pack mentality."

We all know this to be true from coming into the prison system and dealing with all the gangs and the cliques that proliferate inside these walls. Here, you get an unfiltered look inside the true souls of humanity. When stripped of all civilized amenities, we revert back into our animalistic ways. It becomes a dog eat dog world as we try to survive as best as we can.

Our human instincts override our capacity to love. The crazy thing is; we never stop long enough to realize that it's OK to be animals as long as we retain that human side to balance out our negative instincts. We all have those thoughts of envy, lust, anger, resentment, etc... That's normal. We all know that even the most gangster individual in the world loves his or her mamma.

In order to overcome the "pack mentality," I believe we need to gain more love and compassion for the world around us. Empathy needs to become a mainstay within our lives. We need to learn to be more conscious of our "pack mentality" so that we can rein in those negative aspects that lie just under the surface.

I'm an alpha male and I've been locked up my whole life. For the first ten years of my bit, I was always the "leader of the pack" in every situation. As I turned thirty, I began to see those

around me for who they really were. The alpha male is only the leader of the pack for as long as he can hold that title. We've all seen those shows about lions where the older lion gets pushed out by a younger lion and even though that may not have been the case in my situation, I relate to that proud old lion as he would leave his land and make his way to die all by himself.

For me, I reached that point where I broke free of the hate and all the other ugliness within myself. I was introduced to the wonderful world of Buddhism and the principles it taught. My mind opened up to the world and I have seen how insignificant we all are in the grand scheme of things. The universe is infinite and we are all but a speck of dust. One minute we are here, then we depart this world to start another life anew.

I always keep those thoughts in mind when I'm confronted with other people's "pack mentality." The ignorance of it all confounds me. The suffering of life is inevitable. We all walk different paths in life and as I look back upon my own past, I see that everything led up to who I am today. We all evolve into who we were meant to be, for better or for worse. While some people will always live with that "pack mentality," others will learn to live in the world around them, free of the things that hold them back. Free of the walls that surround them. It is then that we learn to love ourselves, and in turn, learn to love those outside of the "pack." To me, that is what it truly means to be human. To overcome our animal tendencies and learn to love everything in life. As I sit here and write this, I am no longer an animal within the pack. Today I am a butterfly that lives a beautiful existence. Someone free of the boundaries of the pack.

Come fly with me...

"A connection/interaction with something outside/bigger than me"
– *How is PE affecting you?* summer 2019 survey response



"Forest Friends" by James Cepak

Floating notes flow as the wind blows. A melody from a flute or pan pipes covering leaves with dew. Forest songs draw me on like a feather to dance through wind and weather. I had heard of nymphs, dryads and pixies; all types of fairies and their dances seen. But hearing a take and meeting a sprite is truly a different experience of heart-flight.

The girl's face was elven and innocent, her eyes closed as her flute floated feathers of a melody, oh so familiar to me, on the wings of the breeze. Yet I couldn't define what it said to me. As a heart beat, it was a thing from a dream where teasing mists breath and animals speak.

SNAP!

A twig underfoot stopped the song like a shot silencing Deadwood. I stood shocked as if the deadman's hand with its aces and eights laid, stopping my heart for a price paid.

"Did you feel its pain?" a soft voice chirped, sorrow shined as tarnished silver in the words, a beam glowed of lights flowed. The girl stared at me, her big sad eyes colored like the forest greens she seemed to feel pain that wouldn't rest.

Amazed, I realized I did feel like slide from that simple twig that lay among tangled vines. I tore at my lip as tears hit. I tasted blood a bit, my teeth shredding my cheek. "I'm sorry...I didn't...I mean, I feel and I didn't mean to"

"Man never means to," the girl sighed, "but you always do. Kill, take, shatter and break...as long as it serves you, you don't care that it hurts, these things you chose."

Stunned, flummoxed; I truly felt like a great lummoX. She spoke true and I didn't know what to do. This sprite, so like a child, had the wisdom of the wild. I wanted to understand but I could not demand, thus I did plead: "Show me what to change and how to be."

"Feel, help life grow," she beamed; a child no more than nine, though I thought I'd had a young woman envisioned as a fairy in my mind. "Be true. Stand bold, teach others to talk and dance with trees. Then you'll truly be free."

I had to ask. "What's your name?"

"Felicity, not that it will be of gain," she replied, smiling as if a game was being played.

I couldn't speak so I dropped to a knee; I wound my fingers around the leaves of a vine I could find crawling between the trees. I found the twig, its pieces parted, yet I felt life somehow restarted.

Felicity vanished from my sight, but still her song took flight in echoes as day became night. "Dance among the trees and be free. Teach and show the world great dreams. I heard the words on the notes of the song even after the wind carried the sound of pixie pipes far, far off.

"Prized Possession" by Edward Jernigan Jr.

As it has long been said, there are only two things in life that are certain. Death and taxes. Of course, as far as taxes are concerned, loopholes exist; however you'll not find such ways to evade death. Death truly is certain. The dilemma present is how a man is supposed to convey such a truth to the premature mind of a little girl who has yet to reach adolescence much less any previous experience with this inevitable happening. The thought had been eating at Ray all day long.

Ever since Pamela's family and friends started arriving long faces had become the day's new standard. Tears soaked cheeks and smeared eyeliner in every room of the house. The house in which Ray and Pamela shared many moments together over the past three decades. A very small fraction of those moments contained the pathos of the one at hand.

Ray, feeling a pain that had clawed its way into the depth of the soul that none of his fellow mourners could possibly mimic at present, found it difficult to return the pity fueled by their temporary depression. All except one. Makayla, a young girl who had isolated herself from the various factions in the room. Her lower back was pressed firmly against the wall, arms wrapped around her shins, face buried in the crevice between her knees. None of the movement around provoked a response. Ray knew that her temporary depression would have a lasting effect on her journey through life some way or another. An intense sense of entitlement washed over Ray. He would have to do everything he could to ease her pain and influence the effects of this occurrence as positively as possible.

Out of nervous habit Ray lifted his ball cap off his head, scratched at his scalp, and ran his hand through the thin strands of gray hair before placing it back on his head. With the release of a heavy breath he approached the little girl.

"Hey there my little angel! How's my grandest daughter?"

The somber visage that rose to meet his eyes was heartbreaking.

"Hey papa...", she replied, wiping a well of tears out of her eyes with the back of her hand.

Ray reached down and offered a hand to her, simultaneously tossing his head to the side in suggestion. Makayla eagerly accepted. Hand in hand Ray led her down a narrow hallway that was decorated with pictures of family dating back several generations to a wooden door that creaked loudly on its hinges as it opened toward a flight of stairs.

The two of them descended into a brief moment of darkness that was dimly extricated when Ray reached above his head and gave a tug at an aluminium beaded rope that hung from a light fixture. The room was packed full of boxes. Ray went directly to a small box, scooped it up, and continued through the room to another door.

This door gave way to warm rays that penetrated the dimly lit basement and caused Makayla to shield her eyes with her forearm. Ray and Makayla stepped out into the backyard. Ray knelt down on one knee and opened the box, as Makayla took a wooden flute decorated in leather strips and nature beads. With both hands Makayla cradled the flute as if the mahogany used to craft the instrument was actually glass.

After a few seconds of silence she looked up from the flute bewildered and asked, "What is it papa?"

"Your grandmother's most prized possession. It's a flute. Whenever life got to be too much and she was feeling hurt or lost she'd pull this out and play it. According to her it would summon the spirits of her ancestors who would provide her with healing or guidance."

"Spirits? You mean like ghosts?"

"I guess you could say that."

"I don't like ghosts papa, they scare me."

"Oh angel, these ain't no evil spirits. They're made of the same stuff as you. They're the ones who lived before us. They're the ones that made you who you are today."

"Yeah? Still sounds kinda scary though. Ain't they dead?"

"I know that this doesn't make much sense to you right now but a day will come that you'll be able to understand. Just

always keep in mind that it ain't the dead you should worry over. It ain't them you should fear my child, but the living."

by William Swiderski

When I see a kid with a musical instrument I think of when I first picked up a guitar. At first I sounded terrible. Learning to just play chords you would have thought I was on stage in front of thousands cheering me on. But It was only my nana who told me I sounded great. But that was enough for me.

Now. As I look back 40 plus years I had more fun sounding terrible than you would expect a kid to have. I guess learning something new doesn't come easy but if it's fun and you have a nana like mine cheering you on then be a 9 year old kid and play on you crazy diamond.

"I've received several letters that blew me away because they were moved by my writing and/or understood. Despite being surrounded by thousands of men, sometimes I feel alone. Yet, I will continue to move onward toward my goal of becoming a better human being." – How is PE affecting you? summer 2019 survey response

"Melody on the Wind" by Giles Belcher

I hear a beautiful melody drifting in the wind. I've been walking in the woods for a while. Stopping to hear which direction the music is coming from. I walk towards the area from where the melody is coming from. I see a young girl, with long red hair, having an animal skin, possibly a bobcat fur draped over one shoulder. The flute is wooden, having fringed leather strips hanging off of it. A jingling of bells I now hear and see dangling from the flute. I must be quiet to not startle her. I am enraptured by the melody being played. Possibly folk, Native American tune, I don't know? I just know it is a beautiful and haunting melody she is playing. The wind lightly fluttering leaves carries the melody easily. I wonder if the wood itself knows of the music being played for its benefit! I must move on. Though I want to stay! Peace and harmony in the woods, music drifting on the wind.



"Couple at a Table" by William Swiderski

Looking at this happy couple reminds me of my old neighborhood in Chicago. It was way back in 1969 when I was 10 years old. I was roller skating down the street when Jean and John Gabor came out of their porch to watch me skate. I was amazed at how interested they seemed to be in what a youngster like myself was doing.

I remember they were sitting there holding hands and at the time I didn't think much of it. But I realize now how much they must have loved each other to still be holding hands well into their 60s. But to this day, I remember how they watched with a smile on their faces.

Another time they were watching and I stopped and talked with them and they told me that they were a skating pair and had actually won medals in the Nationals and the Olympics. Now I knew why they were so interested and it made me feel pretty good.

So many years ago and I still remember it like it happened yesterday. So Jean and John, thanks for a happy memory that has lasted me a lifetime.

"A night out" by Natasha Maready

"I told you you'd like it, May!" Donnie exclaimed.

"Well yeah Donnie. It's hoppin' in here. Of course I like it," said Maybelle.

What Maybelle didn't know was that Donnie had set it up with the band for her to sing a song on stage tonight. Donnie just knew that would make Maybelle happy as a lark and then maybe he could ask her to marry him.

Maybelle watched everyone like she was trying to commit every detail to memory. Donnie was glad to see her beautiful smile. When the band picked up he asked Maybelle to dance. They danced the Charleston and the Watusi to the next two songs. Then the band leader grabbed the microphone and introduced "A lovely little gal- Maybelle Jhonstone!" As the audience clapped and hooted Maybelle's jaw dropped. "Donnie.... did he just say...?" She was cut off by the cheese eatin' grin that had spread on Donnie's face.

"Oh , you did. You ole polecat you!" said Maybelle.

"Well baby, I guess you better get on up there," Donnie said as he joined the rest of the crowd in applause. Maybelle walked over to the stage and grasped the band leader's outstretched hand to step onto the stage.

"Alright sweetness," said the man, 'what would you like to hear?' Maybelle asked. "Do you know anything by Miss Billie Holiday?" The bandleader said,

"Of course sweetness," and started up the band.

Now Donnie knew that May had the prettiest voice he had ever heard. He also knew that she was happiest when she was singing. But what Donnie didn't know was the fact that in the audience that night sat Mr. Bobby Banks- the man who owned and starred in the biggest radio show around. As Maybelle finished singing her song, there wasn't one person in that club not

on their feet applauding. Maybelle stepped down off the stage and headed for Donnie, grinning ear to ear. Before she could cross the dance floor, Mr. Bobby Banks was standing in front of her with his hand out to introduce himself.

"Hello there beautiful. My name is Bobby Banks. I own the Bobby Banks radio show and I believe you just may be a star."

Something ignited inside Donnie when he saw a man stop his girl and talk to her. So he closed the gap, walked around the stranger and put a protective arm around Maybelle. As he planted a kiss on her cheek, Donnie said,

"That was the most May!" Donnie thought to himself, "I don't like the looks of this clown."

Almost sensing his thoughts, the man extended his hands once more; this time to Donnie. "Hiya buddy. I was just tellin' this lovely lady that I would like her to come on my radio show. The name's Mr. Banks, but you may call me Bobby."

Maybelle interjected,

"Thank you Mr. Banks, but my pap would have my hide if I even suggested that I wanted to go on the radio."

"Well honey," said Bobby, "I wouldn't wanna make your good ole pap mad, but does he know that I would pay you twenty dollars to sing on my show?"

"Well no, but I would have to ask him if it was okay." said Maybelle.

"Fine, fine," said Bobby. "Here's the address to my radio station. Just come on down on Wednesday at seven if it's alright with your pap." Maybelle took the little piece of paper and looked at it with round eyes as Bobby Banks walked away. Donnie- glad that he was gone- reached for the paper in Maybelle's hand.

"Here May. I'll hold onto it until you ask pap." She looked at Donnie with stars in her eyes, and said,

"I'm gonna be a star!"

Donnie said,

"Now wait, May..." Maybelle answered,

"Wait nothin'. Donnie James Franklin, you want to marry me don't you? Well the twenty dollars sure would help pay for it!"

Donnie sputters

"wh.. wh.. Who told you?"

Maybelle placed a hand on Donnie's cheek lovingly.

"Nobody told me Donnie Dear. I love you and you love me. It was obvious. Well... especially after I found the ring in your coat pocket."

Then Donnie pulled the ring out of his pocket and dropped to one knee.

"May, my beautiful Maybelle, will you marry me?"

Maybelle reached for Donnie's hand and said,

"Oh Donnie, I have to ask Pap."

Archives Update - Caitlin has joined our PE program to help us archive our collection of your writing and art. We were drowning in all the paper you sent and since the summer she has been going through and digitizing your journals and art. We are

looking back at other contributions we would like to save online that have been sent in by PE participants over the years. We may start downloading all of the interesting writing that was submitted from The New Jim Crow" book club we ran a few years back. We will definitely be examining what we want to include from our past, but what we are more certain of is that we want to archive much of what you send from here on in. It takes time, but we believe what you have to say is important. We have 4000 people regularly writing to us, so we do not intend to archive it all. Caitlin is helpful in providing a perspective on what we should save. All this takes time. She is a professional archiver and we are fortunate to have her help. I have asked her to introduce herself, and to select some artwork from the archives for this issue. In future PE New's you will see more of work from the Archives.

Hello all! We have been working hard to archive the work that you have been sending to us for the last couple of years. Many Cornell students have been volunteering to help scan and take pictures of your art and journals. We are now in the process of putting some work online, while continuing to scan more of your work- including programs, poetry and other writings. In this newsletter you will find a survey about your work in the archive. To help us create the archive we'd love to have more information about you and your art/writing.

Personally, it has been so great to be able to see so much work from you all from all over the country. I have only started volunteering with Prisoner Express last year, so this project has been a way for me to get familiar with your work and stories! I hope that I continue to get to know you your writing and artwork better as more and more of it arrives and is preserved for the future. If there is ever something that you do not want to share publicly please let us know and we will respect those wishes. We also will not feature anything that contains information that we deem to be sensitive. We want to make your work seen and also protect your privacy as best as we can.

Keep reading the newsletters for more archived work and expect to see things on the website soon.

-Caitlin



Art by **Edward Rodriguez**

Survey - Here are a few fast facts from the survey responses from Summer 2019.

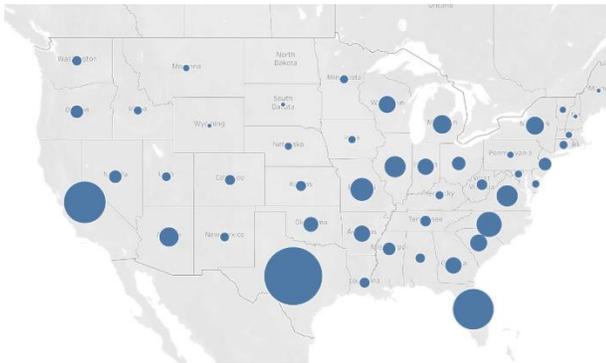
Of the nearly 1200 people whose responses we've collected so far, about **84% have shared Prisoner Express materials with other inmates.**

Many fewer -- only about **40% -- have shared Prisoner Express materials with family or friends** outside the prison system

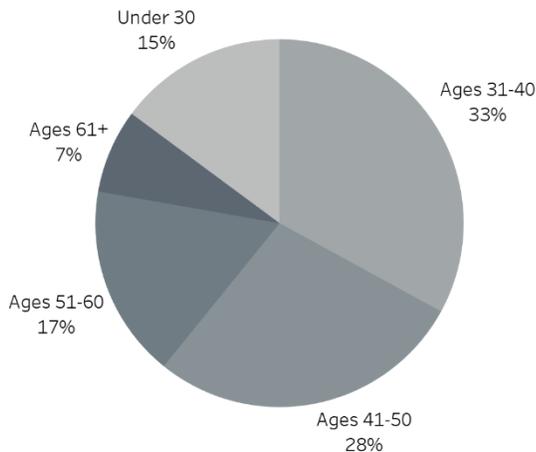
More than **615 respondents have been receiving Prisoner Express mailings for less than a year**, while 274 respondents have been receiving mailings for three or more years (and 64 of whom, for over five years!). There's a very large group of people pretty new to PE, as well as a large group of long-term followers. **213 respondents have received 5 or more programs!**

213 respondents put 11 or more hours into at least one program!

Here is a breakdown of survey responses by **location**:



and by **age**:



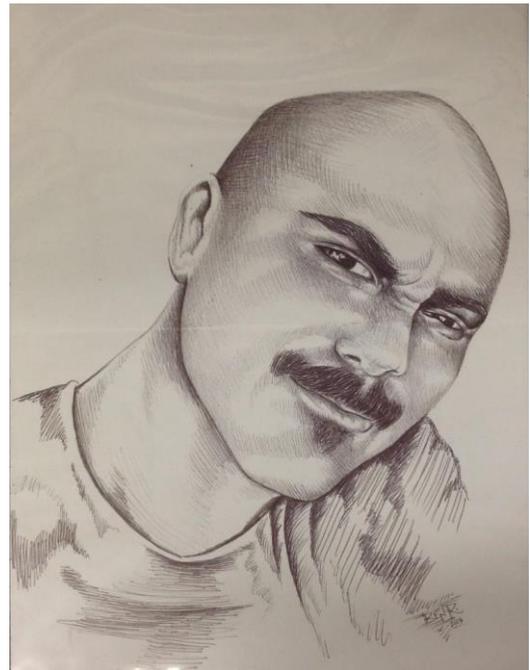
Here are a bunch of survey comments my students pulled out, with bold emphasis added for shorter segments:

“Again, thank all of y'all. Life's struggles are meant to teach us and prepare us for the future. We all go through different things but the emotions are the same. The feeling of failure and inadequacy is a lie. We have all been blessed with the tools to succeed and the mind is the most powerful one. Iron sharpens iron. Thank y'all for continuing to offer us programs that help us to discard the chains that have bound us for most of our lives. The work y'all do is more important than one can know. Thanks.”

“Prisoner express has help me become a better writer, it's programs are great builders of character, motivating and inspiring. They push you to try new things, to be better, they create opportunities for self-reflection. Your programs have helped me reinvent myself. I am grateful and sincerely appreciate the students for the time, their feedback, dedication and commitment to our works.”

“Hells yeah! P.E is the most relevant program I've done in my 22 years in prison. It has allowed me to share what I've learned in life with other prisoners, enabled me to meet and be inspired by/inspire other imprisoned artists/writers, allowed me to share the beautiful parts of myself while the system struggles/projects to portray and make us only ugly/undesirable. I often feel like I'm drowning in the systems' evil projections. PE is like a life raft full of other survivors in a shipwreck of society's poor and rejected.”

“[The] programs help us to discard the chains that have bound us for most of our lives.”



Art by **Ben Rodriguez** from the Archives

REGISTRATION FORM

Please Note: If you received this newsletter, you are on our mailing list through Aug 2020. This form or a letter should be returned in a timely manner if you want to sign up for programs.— and If you don't want to cut up your newsletter, you can write a list of programs you wish to join and send it to us . Please don't hesitate too long in responding or you may miss your chance to join this series of programs. We use Bulk Mail services at the USPS, and that requires we mail each lesson in one batch. In exchange for doing it that way the cost of mailing is reduced to about 18 cents per mailing. It makes a big difference as we are cash poor but full of energy and ideas. So, sign up before enrollment period ends, sometime in mid-April or early May depending on the unit.

Programs – Please check the box of each program in which you wish to participate. Carefully read the requirements of each program before signing up.

Expedited Book Mailings – Check with the administration of your facility to be sure you are allowed to participate. If yes, please send a check for \$4.00 or some other means that is allowed at your prison to cover postage. Books are free, but the mailing cost is not. We have a good selection of donated used books List types of books you want, and we will make the best match with our existing collection of books.

Please fill in this if you order expedited books

_____ **Number of books allowed**

_____ **Soft cover only**

_____ **Hardcover and soft covered both allowed**

Poetry Project – Please send me the next Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 22. I understand that to receive the anthology I am required to submit a poem for consideration in the anthology.

Financial Literacy Study guide- Please send this packet which hich will show me many ways in which I can better navigate life with my new and improved math and reasoning skills

Journal Project- I will keep a Journal for a year, and may share my entries with PE. Please send me a Journal Starter packet.

- Song Writing Project- Come join Kathy Z and explore the world of songwriting. Kathy will help you access your creative side to create song lyrics

World of Birds- Explore the interesting world of the feathered flying inhabitants of planet earth.

Chess Club- Yes, I want to receive mailings on how to improve my chess game. This packet will also explore the history of the game in detail.

Art Knows- Come explore the world of art with Treacy. Treacy will continue to expand your art horizons with tips, insights and her care for you and your artwork

Meditation Project- Tara is opening this project to all who wish to delve inward and discover the freedom and truth within us all. offering is appropriate for all people. It is not religion, but rather a personal practice leading to positive action rather than the usual cycle of unconscious reaction to the stimulation around us.

Book Club- Please send me a copy of Slaughterhouse Five. There are only 500 copies available and that once the books are spoken for enrollment for this project will end

You do not need to sign up for the Theme and Picture Writing or Sanjna's special writing program on Personal Growth. By submitting your writings and art, you are automatically included on all future mailings regarding those individual projects.

NAME: (PLEASE PRINT)

ADDRESS and ID #

I give the Alternatives Library permission to post my writings and artwork on the web

SIGNATURE:

DATE: _____

Survey- Mailing Programs-As I mentioned earlier in the newsletter, we are getting more returned mail, both program packets and our book packages. Please fill out the table below if you participated in the last cycle of programming.

Your responses help us know how big the problem is, and it helps guide us as to how to solve it. Also please know if you requested a packet after they had already been sent out, you would not get it and it is not a reflection of problems in the postal system, but rather our policies.

Program Name	Requested	Received	Completed	Rate between 1-5 1=Excellent 5=Not Useful	Any Comments Can be on separate paper
Winning Through Math					
Journal Project					
Let's learn Spanish					
Chess Club					
ARTknows					
Meditation Project					
Meaning of Life Book Club					
Building a Book					
Expedited Book Package					
Theme packets you wrote for through 9/19					

ALL PE participants! The following questions need answers!

Are you allowed to have mail that has RETURN ADDRESS or MAILING LABELS on the envelope? Y OR N

What is the limit on how many sheets of paper you can have in a single PE packet? _____

Have you had trouble receiving our mailings ? Y or N

Are you allowed to receive USED BOOKS from our library sponsored book mailing project? Y or N NEW BOOKS? Y or N

Bonus question-some prisons are blocking mail due to the glue on mailing tabs and labels. Does this mean the glue on an envelope or stamp will disqualify mail? KY, MI and federal prisons are leading the way in disallowing mailing labels.

PA prisoners-Are any of you getting programs from last cycle? [all our bulk mail is sent Bricker Rd, as instructed] Y or N

Optional if possible -Can you supply us the address of the people who oversee mail room operations in your state. If federal, the nation-wide address [send in separate sheet].

Final notes - It is always a pleasure to send out a PE News to all of you. You share so much with me in your letters and I seldom find the time to write back to you individually. Often, I use the newsletter to update you all on what my life looks like, and share a few thoughts about what I think is important. PE not only provides you with information and education, but it also supplies all the volunteers, including me, with the same. We here at the Alternatives Library have benefited greatly from our Prisoner Express program. In helping you explore your humanity, we also find our own. The students who volunteer for this program come away with a sense that their actions can make a difference. Over the years I have seen students find their occupational path through their work at PE. Just yesterday I was called for a reference for Alex who ran our book room last year. He was applying to a nonprofit that works on prisoner's rights in PA. I keep coming back to the idea that we can change the world one relationship at a time, and that PE is helping do that. My life away from the library and PE continues to keep me engaged. Next year I may have all three of my children in college. My eldest wants to go back to school and hopes to be accepted in a chiropractor program. My other daughter is going to the local community college to study Hospitality. My son, the youngest of the children graduates high school this year and has already been accepted to Cornell University to study engineering. The Alternatives Library is on the Cornell campus and it makes me so happy to think I will see him going thru college over the next 4 years. Two years ago, I got divorced ending a marriage of 20 years [2nd marriage]. Watching my family life as I knew it dissolve and not living with my children seemed a great obstacle. I guess I am making the best of a difficult situation. Time has a way of healing all things.

I have a girlfriend now, and she and I are going to take a few weeks later this winter and visit Costa Rica for time at the beach and birdwatching in the mountains. I know it sounds like I live an extravagant life, but actually I am very frugal which allows me to take trips as well as manage PE on the scant funding. Of course, it is also difficult to get by when resources are limited and easy to stress out about what the future will bring. Having survived and actually thrived since the divorce has me realizing that projecting fear into my future about marriage, money or most anything else doesn't help. In the past I have motivated myself through feeling stress, and while that may be an effective way of getting things done, in the long run it doesn't really improve the quality of my existence. I wish you all the best this new year and look forward sharing a bit about my Costa Rica adventure in the next newsletter.

As you can tell from my frequent mentioning, I fear many of our programs mailed out for last cycle did not make it to some of you. Knowing the extent of the problem will help me find a solution. We expect to continue PE for a while and ensuring our programs get to you is of utmost priority. Please fill out the short survey about mail, and feel free to send in any comments or suggestions regarding mail with your survey.

Remember, we plan to mail out the programs listed in this issue of PE in mid-April. Please return your registration form by then. If

you need too, it is okay to send in a handwritten request for programs.

Though I am not a great believer in religion, as the days go by I see more and more truth to the Golden Rule.

“do unto others as you would have them do unto you” ----Best wishes—Gary



Art by **Edward Rodriguez**



Art by **Raymond Palmore** from the Archives

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Subscriptions are free to prisoners.

The Durland Alternatives Library, which funds Prisoner Express, is a project partner of the Center for Transformative Action. Additional Support comes from the Cornell Public Service Center and the Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives and Engaged Cornell



Art by **Michael Sloan**