



Special Issue!

The Beat Within



Volume 2.0 • September 2019

THROUGH THEIR EYES: REFLECTIONS OF OUR COMMUNITIES

FEATURING:

**Second Chances: Our 2019
Art and Essay Contest
Winners and Honorable Mentions**

- CURYJ
- Fresno Barrios Unidos
- Fathers & Families of San Joaquin
- Resilience Orange County
- Young Women's Freedom Center
- Youth Justice Coalition/
Free LA High School

RE-FOCUS



POSITIVE
**YOUTH
JUSTICE**
INITIATIVE

ORGANIZING FOR A
HEALTHY JUSTICE SYSTEM

1st Place Art Winner Orlando Smith, San Quentin State Prison, San Quentin, CA

EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome readers, to our highly anticipated, special issue volume 2.0 of The Beat Within! You may recall our first edition special issue, published back in 2017 with a grant from The Center at Sierra Health Foundation, to expand our workshops into community-based organizations. We're thrilled to say that this year, with continued support, our 2.0 iteration has brought The Beat a tremendous amount of growth. In this issue we feature our first ever Art and Essay Contest, where we received hundreds of submissions from youth and adults all over the country. We've had the pleasure of continuing to host workshops with likeminded organizations, as well as forming new partnerships within our communities through the power of the written word.

We want to take this opportunity to thank our collaborators, with whom we build a culture rooted in resistance and resilience:

Barrios Unidos from Fresno, CA, CURYJ from Oakland, CA, Fathers & Families of San Joaquin in Stockton, CA, OC Resilience in Santa Ana, CA, Women's Freedom Center in San Francisco, CA, and Youth Justice Coalition-Free LA High school in Los Angeles, CA. These organizations are members of the Positive Youth Justice Initiative, a youth and community-led program of The Center at Sierra Health Foundation, and do incredible work to fight injustices and uplift their communities, and we are honored to strive with them.

And of course, we want to thank our writers and artists, without whom our work would not be possible. We see you, we hear you, and we are committed to amplifying your story. Your voice is powerful and necessary in our world.

We hope you enjoy this special publication of The Beat, showcasing the work of youth and adults speaking their truth. Our writers and artists are also activists, visionaries, leaders, and teachers. They offer such profound insight and wisdom in the following pages. A huge thank you to The Center at Sierra Health Foundation, for making another stellar special issue possible. The Beat goes on!

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The Beat Within publishes a bi-weekly magazine of writing and art by incarcerated youth. We are a Member of Intersection for the Arts. Intersection provides resources, community and cultural space in order to contribute to the sustainable practices of artists and arts organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area. Visit www.theintersection.org.

At The Beat Within, we go through a lot of trouble to censor inappropriate sexual remarks, foul language, and gang references. There is enough tension in our communities already—we don't aim to bolster it. It is in The Beat's interest to promote peace and unity. Our goal is to educate one another.

The Beat Within publishes the opinions and views expressed by the participants in our workshops. This is simply the pure voice of the youth. The views you read do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher, editor or staff. All rights are reserved. Nothing from this publication can be reproduced without our written permission. If published, your work becomes the property of The Beat Within, but you authors are free to publish elsewhere.

To our writers: What you write could be hazardous to you. Your words have consequences, and could be used to incriminate you. Try to illuminate your feelings and viewpoints without running the risk of providing ammunition for those who might use your words against you.

Young Women's Freedom Center, San Francisco, CA: Jessica Nowland, Executive Director, Krea Gomez, Ifasina Clear

Youth Justice Coalition, Free LA High School, Los Angeles, CA: Kim McGill, Lead Organizer and Seth King

Resilience Orange County, Santa Ana, CA: Claudia Perez, Executive Director and Abraham Medina

Barrios Unidos, Fresno, CA: Ashley Rojas, Executive Director, Alejandra Gutierrez, Carlo DeCicco

Communities United For Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ), Oakland, CA: George Galvis, Executive Director, Marlene Sanchez, Rosie Santiago

Fathers & Family of San Joaquin: Sammy Nunez, Executive Director, Crystal Davenport and Raymond Aguilar

The Center at Sierra Health Foundation: Chet P. Hewitt, President and CEO, Matt Cervantes, Alejandra Gutierrez, Lisa Hailey, Katy Pasini, and Samantha Garcia

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The Beat Within, San Francisco, CA: David Inocencio, Founder, Director & Senior Editor, Lisa Lavaysse, Manen Pau, Peggy Simmons, Michael Kroll, Andrea Flores and Simone Zapata

Writers: Thanks to all the participants in our writing workshops. If you have any questions or comments about The Beat Within, please contact us.

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YOUTH ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS!

1st

Regret, Reconciliation, Repetition

People find it difficult to admit fault. We would rather receive an apology than apologize for our own wrongdoings. It is a position of power: having the ability to forgive someone or not, rather than being at the mercy of another, in a vulnerable position.

We all wish we could take back certain decisions. I do, frequently. The situations I could have handled differently keep me up at night, but I try not to let them eat me alive.

My father's death was different: it continuously creeps up on me. The weekend of his death, a Saturday, I was with my mom and my girlfriend in Berkeley while my father stayed home in San Francisco. I had already decided to go home with my mother for the weekend instead of returning to him that night. The day before, on Friday, I slept at my friend's so the last time I saw him was on Thursday night. Sunday morning, I had to go home and pick up my father's Giants game tickets that my sister and I planned to attend later that day. We never reached the stadium. Instead, when I arrived home, I found my dad, dead on the floor.

I hate myself for not going home to spend time with my father, for not enjoying his company, for being selfish and only thinking of myself. It was not my mom's weekend; I only went as I felt I didn't spend enough time hanging out with her. Even worse, if I were home, I believe he wouldn't have gone out and unsuspectingly bought OxyContin pills that were tainted and mixed with cocaine and fentanyl. He wouldn't have taken those pills because even though he had been taking pills for over a year without anyone knowing, I never saw him do it. If I were home, he would not have suffered a slow, painful death.

It's hard to forgive myself. Especially when I think about the part of my upbringing where I lived with my mom and there was domestic violence and abuse displayed to me, creating a very unstable household. There had always been violence and instability in my home to varying degrees but for the longest time I could not forgive my mom, that was before I realized that while all this was happening, I never did anything. I realized that not forgiving my mom was essentially victim blaming and even though she told me not to tell anyone about the horrors that occurred in the house, she was scared and she only wished to protect me. My mother had her voice taken away and I never spoke up for her. I could have helped her, could have saved her such pain and anguish. For how damaged and scared I was and am, I never once stopped and thought about what my mom experienced, what she endured. When I would go to my dad's house on the weekends, I got a break from my feelings of helplessness and hurt, she didn't.

My father taught me to love myself, all of it. He told me to love both my Native and Spanish ancestry. As Malcolm X once said "you can't hate the roots of a tree and not hate the tree". How can I not forgive myself and hate aspects of my being, and not say I hate myself? Since my father taught me this brand of self-love and acceptance, it is not fair to continue to hold this burden of self-blame.

But who can say that my father's death was avoidable? Perhaps it was inevitable. My point is that if I am to be consumed by what-ifs for the rest of my life, I will forget to live. My father would not want me to be stuck, he would want me to heal and live a prosperous life. He would want me to live the life he worked for, to take advantage of opportunities he never had, to live the life he never had the chance to. I am educated, I will soon be going to college, I would not be in this position had it not been for my father and I am eternally grateful.

I know that, given a second chance, I would speak up for my mom and defend her but what is in the past cannot be changed. What is important is that I acknowledge the past and learn from it so something like this cannot happen again. It is important to not continuously stay in the past and to move on. I forgive my mom and I would hope she could find it within herself to do the same.

After all, what good does holding grudges do? Why hold resentment, anger and dissent when those are destructive emotions that will not help you heal. It is about restorative justice as only love can drive out hatred as Martin Luther King Jr. famously outlined. Everyone is looking for love, for acceptance, for understanding, for forgiveness. I can't speak for others but I choose to relinquish "power" and will work on forgiveness, not for them, but for my own well-being.

-Elias

Bio: Elias is a high school senior, who resides in Berkeley, CA. He is also a valued participant in our community writing workshops at HOMEY in San Francisco, CA.

From The Beat: This past January, we asked Beat writers, "Why give someone a second chance, or many chances? When have you given, or been given another chance?"

Hundreds of submissions poured into The Beat headquarters from youth and adults, incarcerated and free, for our 2019 Art and Essay Contest, Second Chances. Choosing the winning pieces was no easy task, as each submission was deep, personal, and impactful. Please join us in extending a warm welcome to the winners of our contest, and be sure to catch our honorable mentions in the following pages.



"Better Dreams" by Antonio

My mother had her voice taken away and I never spoke up for her. I could have helped her, could have saved her such pain and anguish.

YOUTH ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS!

Chances

Should you give out second chances:
Well when someone goes against you
You already know the answer
So you hold up them grudges
And the negativity spreads in you like some cancer
See it's "funny" to think about
Because we don't like forgiving
But we expect to be forgiven
Everything has a price
And the price is forgiveness
You need to forgive your own past
If you want a new beginning
Because if you keep picking up broken glass
You gon' keep on bleeding
And if you keep wearing that mask
Eventually when you take it off you're gon' see it
See, wherever you stand
Is what kind of air that you're breathing
Trying your best to hold your breath
For a secret that's not worth keeping
Words are just words
That some people say without meaning
Ignorance lives within
Looks can be deceiving
You're born in this world without opinion
But you learn what the world believes in
Pride is a gift
But they view pride as a sin
The majority sees it as wrong
So where do we begin
Sometimes I ask myself
"Do I deserve a second chance after all?"
I'm standing on an edge
Looking down on prison walls
If I continue to do what I do
And take one little step forward I will fall
If forgiveness is the key
And change is the lock
How do I open up
To something that I always block?
They say I can't change
Well I say that is false
They say that I'm done
I say I've just stopped
I will pick myself up
And give myself a second chance
Learn to forgive others
While letting myself enhance

-King J

Bio: I'm incarcerated in the San Mateo County Juvenile Hall, but I don't let that stop me from what I love doing, which is writing.



My path from here on out is going to be a good, positive, confident attitude because I want to make my family proud.

My Situation

We all do things good or bad. In that exact moment, we don't think of the outcome, we just react to it. We find ourselves stuck and sometimes it is too late to see who we might hurt.

When I started high school, I was doing very good academically and playing sports. My mom gave birth to my brother. He was a blessing, but it led me to being late to school everyday because my mom had to deal with him. My attendance was getting bad, so the school moved me to a closer school which I was not familiar with. I hung out with the wrong crowd and started smoking. It made me feel good at the time, but I knew in the long run, it would not be good for me. It was like there were two me's. I was in a particular situation where I wanted to impress my "friends" and show them I wasn't scared.

This was the worst mistake I've ever made because it led to something serious. I also hurt my mother, but she supports me no matter what. She's the reason I get up everyday and try my hardest to reach my goals.

I've been incarcerated for about six months and it's hard not knowing what's going to happen to me. But I have a lot of support here to keep me pushing forward. This bad situation has led to a second chance to change who I am. I am thankful for coming to juvenile hall even though I'm away from my family. It's really a gift and an eye-opener to me. It's changed me a lot in a positive way and shaped me to follow my dreams because this is not the life I want to live.

I've learned a lot about myself and what I want to achieve. I'm attending school regularly and I feel myself getting smarter and getting the knowledge I need. This was a blessing in disguise that I truly needed because I wouldn't have found my true self. I would have been lost and doing the same bad habits.

I see teens coming in and out of the hall, and I just hope that one day they can learn that there is way more out in the real world than being locked up. I've been given a second chance to change the way I react to certain situations. You can really learn from second chances when you are given the opportunity to change your mindset. But sometimes it's difficult to try new things because you're so used to the old habits. But certain situations can really make you think about your future and what path you want to take.

My path from here on out is going to be a good, positive, confident attitude because I want to make my family proud. I also want to be a good example for my little brothers and show them that everyone makes mistakes but you can grow from a mistake and be something great in life.

When I get out of here and finish off probation, I want to go to college. I have a lot of passion for different types of careers. I know I'm too young to choose a direct path, that's why I'm setting a lot of goals for myself.

I just want to give back to my community and help the people who are struggling. One of my biggest goals is to become a firefighter because they risk their lives to save others and help take care of the environment.

I know my future will hold greatness so I need to keep pushing forward. One day, I want to look back on this situation and think how I overcame such a bad decision.

-Angel

Bio: I am currently in Santa Cruz Juvenile Hall, but for my future I seek to be successful. I enjoy playing sports — football, basketball, and baseball. I'm proud of growing from this situation.



"Rose" by Eric

ADULT ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS!



How Not to Feel

He broke my heart. After that night I'd see him act the same bewildering way many more times. It was, I eventually learned, what too many beers did to him. But the first time my uncle hit me (I was four or five years old), all I knew was that something had changed. Not in him. No, something had changed in me.

I was named after my Uncle Mike, and that already made me feel close to him. When he started calling me his "Bodyguard," though, and especially when he'd introduce me to people that way ("This is my Bodyguard," he'd announce, and gesture toward me in an almost cocky way that made me feel strong), that made me feel special. It made me feel like my Uncle Mike loved me as much as I loved him, which was more than infinity. So the night my mom shouted at me to "be good" as she rushed off to her bartending job, and that Uncle Mike was going to come watch me, I was ecstatic. Usually, I'd complain that I wanted to go with her, but that night I felt happy and lucky to stay home.

Night had already fallen by the time mom pulled out of our driveway. The headlights of her car showed like brilliant extensions of Mom's protective and sometimes worrisome nature, spying in on us one last time through the windows, then sweeping across the front yard like security searchlights, as she turned onto the street. At this dramatically-lit farewell, Uncle Mike simply pushed a movie into the VCR. He coolly plopped down onto the far end of the couch, beer in hand, and invited me with a slight nod to sit and watch with him. I rushed to the cushion at his side, quickly studying his relaxed, yet confident posture so that I might imitate his greatness. Then I turned with him to the screen. Together we watched whatever it was, the bonding silence between us throughout this blessed cinematic experience only ever interrupted by the hiss and crack of beer cans opening every so often – not to mention the loud, intentional way he sometimes burped, which made both of us laugh every time. And I loved every minute. Not of the film, but of being so close to the awesome man who loves me, who was even like a father to me while my real father was locked somewhere in a prison cell.

When the movie ended, I was terribly excited for whatever we'd do next. I jumped up and down on the couch next to Uncle Mike slapping at his broad shoulders and shaking him, asking him what he wanted to do now. He didn't respond except to carefully balance what must have been nearly a full can of beer in one hand, while the other took me at my shoulder. Slowly, yet with an effortless dominance, he forced me back an arm's distance way from him. I thought he'd started an impromptu game of play-fighting. So, I leapt from the couch, undaunted by his challenge, and continued my hyper assault on him, now slapping at his knees and thighs. I laughed. I was so happy. I was having so much fun. Until...

This time he wasn't careful at all. "Goddamn it!" he roared, the unexpected burst of anger in his voice shocking me. I froze. Then, even more to my surprise, he drew one giant leg into his body before driving the hard sole of his massive boot into my soft, little belly. The force was great enough to shoot me like a cannonball clear across the living room. At once, I couldn't breathe and I was scared. But Uncle Mike just left me writhing there in agony, struggling for air as much as I struggled to understand what just happened. What did I do wrong?

I didn't know yet how to blame alcohol's control over him. And I loved him and looked up to him too much to accuse him of hurting or betraying me, or of being imperfect for even a second in my eyes. So, as soon as I could gather my wits and my wind, I apologized for misbehaving. That is, though I never said this aloud, I apologized for being too happy, for ignorantly displaying love and affection (especially with such abandon), which I believed was my offense. "I'm sorry Uncle Mike," I pleaded at his feet, but my words fell short. He just sat there, drunk and quiet, can of beer still held loosely in one hand. He didn't even bother to look at me, which somehow stung most of all.

Uncle Mike continued to be my beloved hero, my idol, and I his loyal bodyguard after that night, but I was different around him now. Even though I did still feel a joyous surge in my belly whenever I saw my favorite uncle, or even at hearing his name, I quickly doused this dangerous feeling with a flood of guilt and shame, and I suppressed even my smiles. From then on, too, I practiced speaking as little as possible to him about myself, especially anything good, afraid of disappointing him if I celebrated too much. And if Uncle Mike praised me (for being a wrestling champion, for instance), I thought it was a challenge, one I met without fail with stoic nods of tolerance more than of acceptance or gratitude.

This hard emotional conditioning eventually carried with me into the rest of my life as well, where countless people would often warn me that I was far too serious. They'd say that I should smile more. "I want to," I'd think, mournfully, without admitting it aloud. Sometimes I was desperate to smile but I was still too afraid. I never lifted Uncle Mike's heavy boot from my bruised core, so not smiling always felt safer.

It took me many difficult years of desperate reflection, painfully honest introspection, and careful study before I finally figured it out. Uncle Mike didn't so violently lash out at me that night to punish my exuberance. I figured out that only a man in tremendous pain himself would ever do such harm to a 4 or 5-year-old child, or any child, but especially one he cared for so deeply. I may never know the secret hurt he suffered, the horrible demons that must have plagued him, or why ever Uncle Mike actually became so enraged that night. But I finally figured out that it wasn't my fault, that I didn't deserve to be punished. Not by Uncle Mike that dreadful night, nor by myself or those sad years after.

Very little relief came from this realization, though, and very little reason to celebrate. I should have felt liberated, I'm sure, like a great weight had been at long last lifted from my burdened soul. Instead, I was left with another shame, and the sickening fear that it was too late, for by now, I had withheld so many smiles, suppressed so many of my emotions – wonderful ones and tragic ones alike. I had denied my own humanity, mistakenly convinced myself that Uncle Mike's vicious boot proved once and for all that I couldn't trust myself to feel. I did it wrong.

I'd been a fool, I clearly see today. Everything I once hoped to keep hidden from the world actually built within me like a powder keg until, in a fuse-lighting drunken rage of my own, I exploded. And now a man is dead, murdered in cold blood at my numbed hands. And for no real reason except that I finally needed to be heard. I'm 32 years old and 15 years into a life sentence in prison, now haunted by the constant regret that I could have saved both of our lives long before I ended them so needlessly. If only I'd been brave enough any time before to welcome myself to be happy – or sad, or scared, or lonely, or in love, or to fully feel whatever else I denied. Both of our lives, mine and the one I took from another, could have been so wonderful. "Oh, my God," I'm driven instead to beg, often through relentless streams of shameful tears, "What have I done?"

The heavens keep quiet and still at this painfully desperate question. Nothing divine answers me. There is only ever a small, familiar voice to be heard, a soft, sweet, innocent voice from deep within myself. The voice of a 4 or 5-year-old little boy not yet scarred by the lies he'll tell himself later, a beautiful boy who still knows how to be happy. He reminds me, no matter how many times I forget, to say I'm sorry, and to promise not to do whatever I did again. "It's okay," the strong, brave little bodyguard smiles and assures me. "After that, we can go play again."

And just like that, I can't help it any more, but to finally smile too, happy at this little boy's gift of a second chance to play.

-Michael Cabral

Bio: Michael started his journey through the system 15 years ago, at age 17, in San Luis Obispo. He takes part in many prison programs, inside Avenal State Prison. Besides being a gifted writer, he also recently helped to lead his baseball team to a championship victory.

If only I'd been brave enough any time before to welcome myself to be happy – or sad, or scared, or lonely, or in love, or to fully feel whatever else I denied.

ADULT ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS!



Chasing Forgiveness

As I sat on my bunk – trying to understand why I was denied parole yet again – something in my mind was telling me that the parole board was never going to grant me parole and give me another chance. Even after I had done everything they asked of me, they kept denying me based on the heinousness of my crime – something I can never change – no matter what I do or who I become or how much I change my life. I will never be able to change the horrible nature of my crime, so why give me a life sentence with the possibility of parole if I'm going to keep being denied based on the only thing I cannot change?

I mean, don't get me wrong, I get it – I committed a horrible crime. I chased someone through the streets of Oakland 'til I cornered him in a backyard and I gunned him down – and for that I had to be punished – but how much is enough? I was only a kid when I committed that terrible crime, and seventeen years later I was still being told that's not enough. How do I get them to see that I'm not the same person who committed that awful crime? That not a day goes by that I don't regret my actions that night?

And how do I get the family to see that? Especially the mother, who never missed a day in court or a parole hearing. She would just sit there with tears rolling down her cheeks, staring at me with eyes filled with hate and hurt. It would just break my heart to see and hear all the hurt and pain I had caused her. I wanted so much to reach out to her and tell her how sorry I am for killing her son – and to beg for forgiveness – but I never did. I just didn't know how or if it would only cause her more pain. Maybe she's right, maybe I should spend the rest of my life in prison. Why should I get another chance when I didn't give her son a chance?

I think it was at that point that I realized that I was never going to get out of prison – the parole board was never going to give me another chance. I would always be defined by the heinousness of my crime, so I just kind of gave up hope and accepted spending the rest of my life in prison as the price I had to pay. The following week I went to church and I asked God to forgive me and to somehow touch the mother's heart and let her know how sorry I am for killing her son. I wanted so much to be forgiven but didn't think I ever would be. To be honest, I was having a hard time forgiving myself – I mean not only had I taken someone's life but I had also destroyed my own life as well. How do I forgive myself for that? I just couldn't.

And then a few months later I was going through my legal work and came across the address of the victim's family. They usually block the address out but somehow didn't – I just sat there staring at that address for about an hour, wondering if this was my chance to say all the things I wanted to say to his mother. Finally I decided to write and tell her how sorry I was, and ask for forgiveness. It took me three weeks to finish the letter and it ended up being twelve pages long. I poured my heart into her – tell her about all the horrible things I suffered as a child and how carrying a gun became a way of protecting myself after being hurt so much by so many people. I then told her exactly what happened on the night that I killed her son – taking full responsibility for my actions and telling her how sorry I am for killing her son. At the end I told her that I know I'll probably have to spend the rest of my life in prison as payment for the life that I took, and that I accept that as my reality, but hopefully one day she can find it in her heart to somehow forgive me, and if not, then I understand because I haven't been able to forgive myself, and not a day goes by that I don't regret what I did and if I could give my life to bring him back I would in a heart beat because

he didn't deserve to die.

When I mailed the letter I felt a sense of relief – I was finally able to say to all the things I've always wanted to say to her. Three years went by and to my surprise at my next parole hearing she didn't show up – this was the first time she hadn't shown up but I didn't think anything of it, and once again I was denied parole based on the heinousness of my crime – which was what I expected.

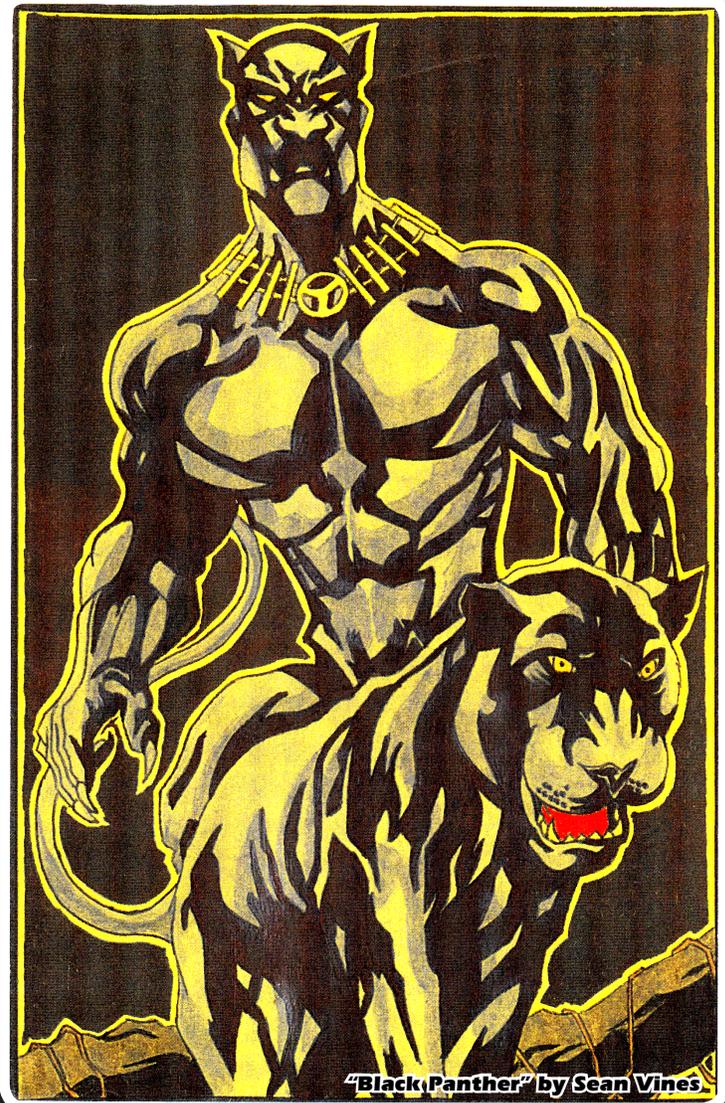
Three more years went by and I had now been in prison for twenty-three years. When I went to my next parole board hearing – and she didn't show up once again – there was a letter from the family, and I was sure they would be asking the parole board not to grant me parole. But as they started reading I couldn't believe what I was hearing – they told the parole board that they believe I had served enough time and should be given another chance. They said they believed that my life would best be served in the community helping others to not make the same choices I did, and that they individually and collectively forgave Mr. Jackson for his crime. And finally she said that if she saw Mr. Jackson walking down the street toward her, that she would feel totally safe.

The front of my shirt was soaked with tears – I couldn't stop crying – they had finally forgiven me. I felt such a relief as I sat there. Then the parole board decided to find me suitable for parole based largely on the letter that the family had written. I took their loved one's life and they forgave me and gave me my life back and for that I will be forever grateful...and sad.

–Jesse Jackson

Bio: Jesse is a 53 year old who has spent over 30 years in the criminal justice system and is currently incarcerated at Deuel Vocational Institution in Tracy, CA on a probation violation 'till May 2019.v

How do I get them to see that I'm not the same person who committed that awful crime? That not a day goes by that I don't regret my actions that night?



"Black Panther" by Sean Vines

ADULT ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS!



Long Road to Forgiveness

What is forgiveness really all about? Do we simply say that we forgive in order to allow another person who may have harmed us to be “let off the hook” of their own guilty conscience? Or, do we choose to forgive because it is like unshackling yourself from the past, or whatever other bad experience that’s dragged us under for so long, it’s now consuming our humanity?

I am serving life in prison for killing a man while he lay defenseless in his bed sound asleep – he never saw me coming. A man that had a son and daughter. A man that despite his own personal demons meant so much to so many people. The same sunlight that beams upon my face and fresh air that fills my lungs, for him was taken that regretful night when I forfeited his, another being’s life, here on this very earth that I’m now able to exist on. For me, that will never seem fair, and forgiving myself for that has been a struggle these past twenty-five years.

The men behind these walls were not born to be what many of us had become – the influences came in many shapes and fashions – nonetheless, each one of our travelled roads have led us to where we are today. We look at one another everyday as we serve out our issued sentences, and yet we seldom “see” one another because we cannot get past the shame and guilt that we’ve carried most of our lives. Mine didn’t just start the night that my own mother handed me a revolver while asking me to shoot her boyfriend. My shame, guilt, and even resentment began when I was just a child.

He was my childhood “monster”. My mother married him shortly after my biological father walked out on us at the age of three. He was an alcoholic-turned-heroin addict, and worst of all he was an abuser – for years this monster beat on my mother and me. I was eleven years old the day that my stepfather almost killed me by beating me with his bare hands. I suffered two collapsed lungs, broken ribs, a fractured skull, and cuts and bruises up and down my body. This would be the last time this monster would ever hurt me again; he went to prison for what he had done to me, and Child Protective Services took me from the custody of my mother. I was entered into the foster care system just two and a half weeks after I’d been lying there in a hospital bed connected to breathing tubes.

The rest of my teen years were spent in and out of juvenile halls, one foster home after another, and eventually sent to the California Youth Authority at the age of fourteen. I’d developed early on all the pitfall ideologies that a boy with little self-worth and low self-esteem does – I’d given up on myself and others that attempted to love and care about me long before I’d started living my life. I could not forgive what had been done to me as a kid; my spirit was broken by those that were supposed to love and protect me, so how could I ever feel safe? How do you understand what it is to forgive someone so cruel? It would get worse before it got better – fifteen years later, my life as an adult would change forever. That forever is why I’m sitting in this concrete prison cell struggling with forgiveness most days than not.

My now-estranged mother and I were reunited after fifteen years; her then-boyfriend was not much different than the rest she’d always given her

heart to. He was an alcoholic who put his hands on women as well. After all those years out of her life, I still had that blind sense of loyalty towards my mother because she’d brought me into this world – that sense of loyalty itself would be abused.

1993 – my own mother handed me the revolver while standing in the hallway of her California ranch home. The thought of taking another man’s life, before and after my mother pleaded with me to pull the trigger, made my stomach turn. I pulled that trigger as he laid there passed out from a night at the local bar; and in those moments, I was handing my life over for hers. I have been in prison since.

I became my own worst nightmare coming into the California prison system. I had become a prison gang member, becoming more and more desensitized to violence, hatred, and worse yet, disregard for my own life and well-being. In all of its irony, I felt as if I had become him, that childhood monster of mine, short of beating on women and children. The hurt I’d experienced growing up coalesced with the betrayal of my own mother filled me with more resentment than most humans can sustain in a lifetime – I was destined to fail at life given the circumstances from the start.

I grew tired. I grew cold. I grew to despise what I’d been doing to others and myself. Walking away from a life I’d known for so long was the hardest part of my journey – what would I then become? Who would Keith Erickson be? Eventually, I would just have to trust that there was still enough humanity left within me that could be restored.

Hurt. Pain. Resentment. Abandonment. Deception. Forgiveness. These were just a few of the whirlwind-like emotions that hijacked me from reaching understanding of “self” for so long. I struggled for years, even after I’d walked away from the prison gang and lifestyle within these walls that bred the ultimate ideologies of hatred. Still, I fought to find my way to the surface.

It starts and stops with “forgiveness” – I had to be willing to forgive myself and stop perceiving myself as a victim of child abuse, ex-gang member, and convicted killer unworthy of change. So I did. I trudged the path to fix my life, my moral fiber and character with the same determination I had to once disregard my life – I rose from the ashes of a once burned-out life, like that of a phoenix.

Today, a notecard glued to the wall of my prison cell with year-old toothpaste reads: “I forgive all that’s been done to me in life so that I may see past the afflictions of yesterday and love stronger tomorrow.”

My stepfather eventually died of liver failure while in prison, and my mother who was convicted with me for the murder of her boyfriend was granted parole two and a half years ago. If I could tell them both anything, I would tell them: “I forgive you for what you both did to me, so that I may begin to be forgiven by others – because that’s all I’ve ever wanted in life, despite where I am, to no longer feel pain and hurt.”

-Keith Erickson

Bio: Each day is another chance for me to awaken and rise like the Phoenix from a life I had previously lived without regard for self and others while constantly restoring my humanity while inside Pleasant Valley State Prison in Coalinga, CA.



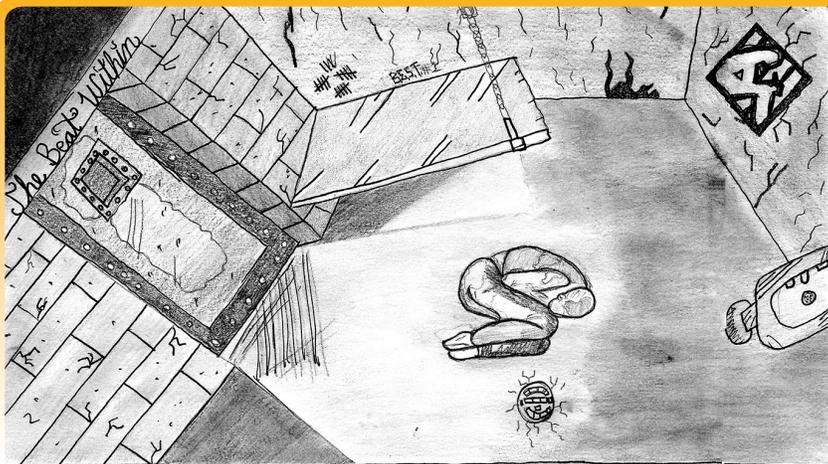
★ YOUTH ART CONTEST WINNERS! ★ "SECOND CHANCES!"

1st Place Art Winner
Andy, Sacramento, CA

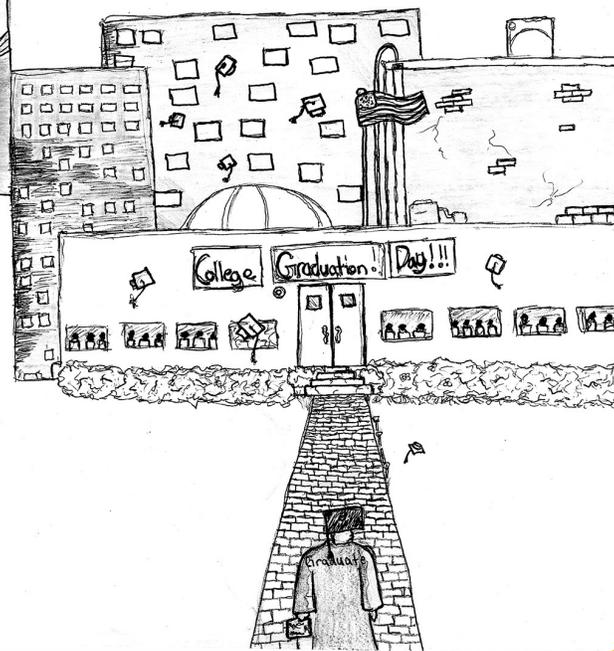
Title: Second Chance

Bio: I am 17 years old. I love to draw, but I want to get better. I am the oldest of all my siblings including my 2 step-sisters. I have gone to The Beat Within program and have had my writing published

"I'm stronger because I had to be,
I'm smarter because of my mistakes,
Happier because of the Sadness I've known
And now wiser because I've learned."



"I'm stronger because I had to be,
I'm smarter because of my mistakes,
Happier because of the Sadness I've known
And now wiser because I've learned."



"I'm stronger
because I had
to be..."



★ YOUTH ART CONTEST WINNERS! ★ "SECOND CHANCES!"

2nd

2nd Place Art Winner
Nour, Alameda, CA
Title: Another Chance

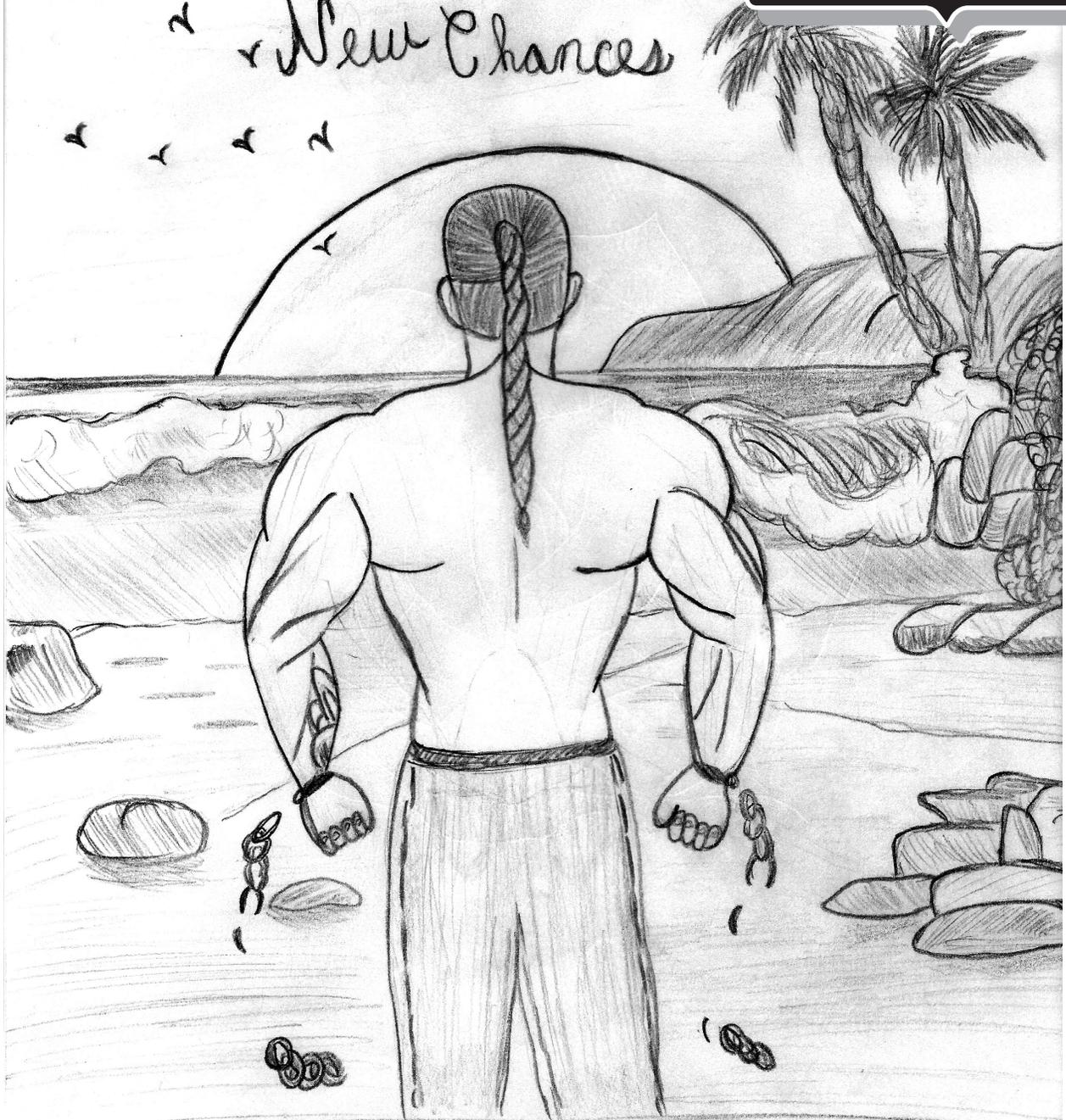
Bio: Nour is 13 years old and was born on October 15, 2005. I like archery, doodling and graphic novels. I am home schooled. (Nour participates in The Beat Within at the Main Oakland Public Library, Teen Services)



★ YOUTH ART CONTEST WINNERS! ★ "SECOND CHANCES!"

3rd

New Year
New Chances



One Day I will Be Free
One Day They will See My Hard work
One Day It will Be My Time To Shine - JL

3rd Place Art Winner
JR, San Mateo, CA
Title: Time To Shine

Bio: I am currently incarcerated in San Mateo, but will be transferred to DJJ. During my stay I like to work-out, draw, write and sometimes do poetry. I enjoy The Beat Within.

★ ADULT ART CONTEST WINNERS! ★ "SECOND CHANCES!"

1st

1st Place Art Winner

Orlando Smith, San Quentin State Prison, San Quentin, CA

Title: Re-Focus

Bio: I am from South Central Los Angeles. I am serving eight life sentences under the draconian three strikes law and 21 years incarcerated (inside San Quentin State Prison in San Quentin, CA). During this time I've taught myself to become a comic book illustrator and writer and have went on to create 18 titles and 64 graphic novels to date.



RE-FOCUS

★ ADULT ART CONTEST WINNERS! ★ "SECOND CHANCES!"

2nd

1,475 immigrant children lost



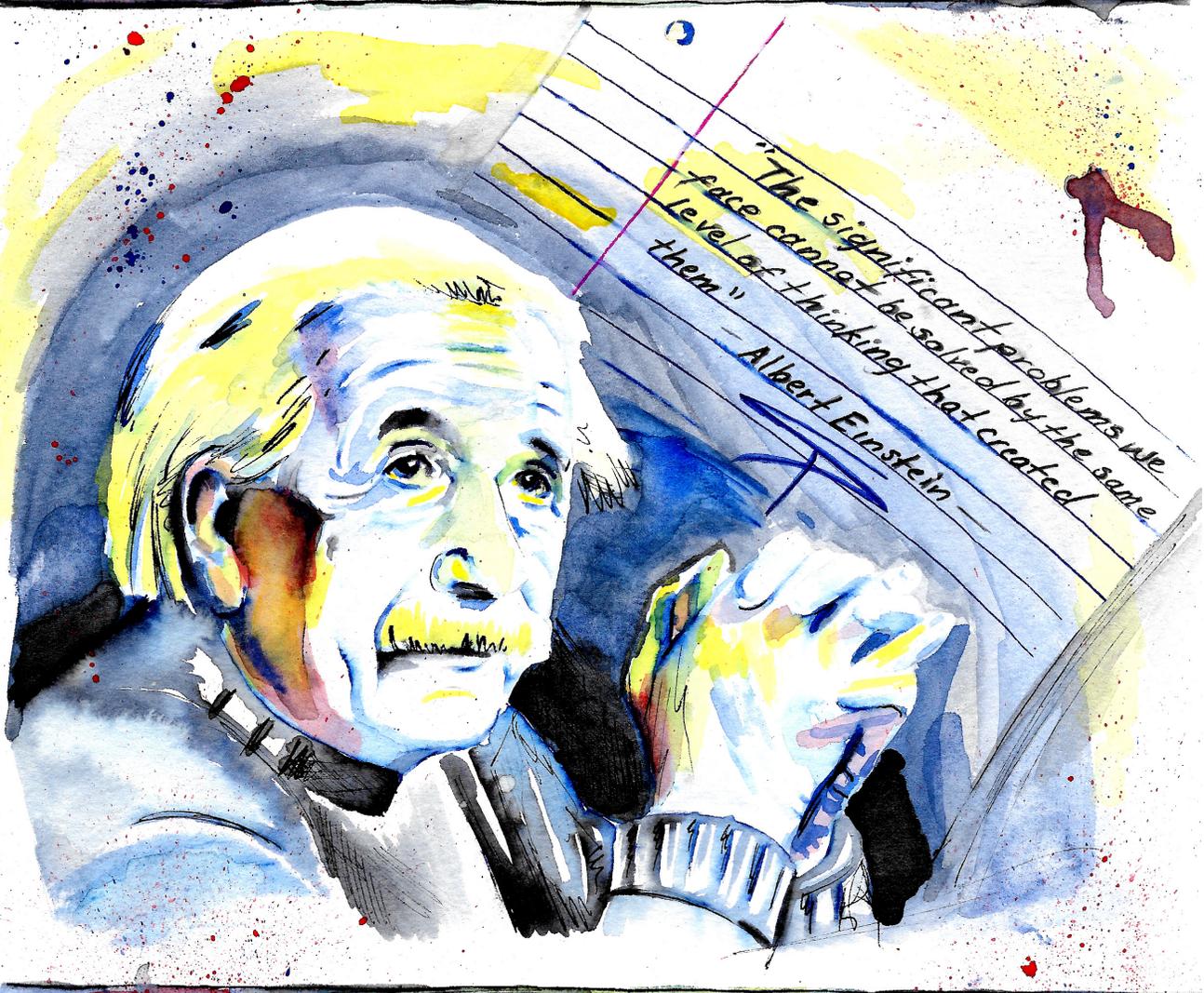
2nd Place Art Winner
Michael Russell, High Desert State Prison, Susanville, CA
Title: 1,475 Immigrant Children Lost

Bio: I drew this drawing because I watch the news daily and all Trump talks about is a border wall, and immigrant kids dying or being lost and sleeping outside with nothing to eat or cover themselves in Mexico border. All they want is liberty, freedom and a good life. The art is all in ink pen black. (Michael created this piece from High Desert State Prison in Susanville, CA).

★ ADULT ART CONTEST WINNERS! ★ "SECOND CHANCES!"

3rd

THE BEAT



WITHIN

3rd Place Art Winner
 Valentino Amaya, Avenal State Prison, Avenal, CA
 Title: It's Within

Bio: Been incarcerated since I was 17. I enjoy all styles of art. I chose this piece and style in hopes to inspire and encourage others with their creativity, and convey a quote Albert Einstein said perfectly. (Valentino created this piece from Avenal State Prison in Avenal, CA).

CURYJ, OAKLAND, CA

Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ)

Pronounced "Courage," since 2011 CURYJ has been empowering young people to organize their communities around ending mass incarceration, youth criminalization, and policy reform.

Formed out of organizing against racist police practices, CURYJ was successful in creating a movement to repeal Prop 21, which ended gang injunctions in California. Among the many community development aspects of their work, CURYJ provides liberation and healing programming for Oakland youth, training them to become restorative justice practitioners in their greater communities.



Puzzle Pieces

Something's missing from my life
And I gave up trying to look for it
I'ma let it come to me...
She says she enjoys my energy
She says I'm different
Her ex treated her bad and I think
She wants me to save her
I'm her missing piece, or so she thinks
She doesn't know me, she just likes the idea of me
I feel it, tho, 'cause I was searching for the same
But if you try to force it, it'll blow up in your face
So even though I'm missing this piece
I understand that I don't need it right now
I'ma focus on other pieces I've neglected
Let me get my health right, my mind right
My paper right
Let me get all these pieces together
Before I try to fit her into my life
If she's the right one, life will let me know

- Rich

From The Beat: We know this: "They don't know me, they just like the idea of me." It's an easy mistake to make and we like that you admit both sides. We agree that it's good to prioritize getting yourself right, and not expect someone else to do it. You won't ever get everything completely sorted, though. So how will you know when you are ready to try?

A Letter to Myself From Five Years

Dear Leo,

I hope that you've improved to become better at communication with people and keeping your head up.

Back then, our old self could barely talk. Always looked down on the ground whenever he walked. Old self had no confidence in himself.

I'm in the middle. Developing, writing this letter, hoping five years from now I'm doing better. Do you ever look back and wish you could have been better? Yeah, we were quiet. We still have big goals we want to accomplish. This letter, you look back, will make you feel happy or sad, either you succeeded or you did not. If you are not doing better five years from now, I'll do it myself. So that way you don't have to feel sorry for the both of us.

Now I can see you doing bigger things, you're the better version than I ever was. I hope you made better friends, too, because to tell you the truth, those friends I had pretend they don't remember you. I think you know now, but if I'm wrong, write me back, but don't take too long. I don't care if anyone can't relate. As long as we got each other. Do you remember when we were in our prime?

- Leo

From The Beat: We love this dialogue with yourself from the point of view of being in the middle of two versions of you. Do you think you will reach a point where you can clearly say, "I succeeded"? What will success five years from now look like, exactly?

The Sacred Cycle of Life

One day I realized that when my daughter turns 30 years old, I will be turning 66 years old. It scared the hell out of me. It was worse than getting a gun pulled out on me, worse than a car accident and even scarier than any near death experience. My beautiful little girl was born when I was 36 years old. An average life expectancy for men of color is around 65 years old. This means that when my daughter reaches full adulthood and child-bearing age, I could potentially be close to death. It hit me like a ton of bricks that I might not be around for my daughter's whole life.

I had never felt more clear about the limits of my mortality at any other point of my life. I felt powerless in that moment of reflection. I told my wife about how this thought had worried me and she laughed at me. I had no choice but to accept this as a rule of nature. The ancient Aztecs were very aware of their mortality and of the sacred role of each season of life: birth, childhood, adulthood, elderly years, and death. I now had a much deeper understanding of what this meant.

Once I got over my fear, I decided that I need to appreciate every moment with my children. I need to stop doing dumb stuff like playing with my phone when my precious kids want to play. There is no more time to waste.

I guess I will have to make it to over 90 years old.

- José

From The Beat: Thank you so much for sharing this journey. We understand the desire not to miss any part of your daughter's life. What are you doing to make sure you make it past 90?

Set Back

First time I went to Juvie, yeah, it was a tragedy.
All my loved ones were wondering what happened to me.
They knew that when I hoop on the court I'm a masterpiece.
Say my grace before you eat. You can't guard me. If you reach, I teach.
I go dumb like Keef the Sneak, after I step back and hit a three.
I had dreams that I'll play college ball or go to the league,
Grinding every day, wondering why some things happen to me.
It's been years. I couldn't see my family but I'm finally out of the black hole.
So watch out for the boast.

-Breoh

From The Beat: How long did your loved ones wonder what happened to you? We'd love to hear more of that story! And now you're back with your family? Are you still playing ball?



"Second Chances" by Gustavo

CURYJ, OAKLAND, CA

Does Punishment Work?

Punishment works sometimes when you take someone's stuff away. But sometimes it doesn't work because when I was little I used to get in trouble a lot and still do the same thing because I knew it was just a punishment.

So I really don't think punishments work because they are going to keep doing it until they learn something or until something bad happens to the person that is doing bad stuff, worse than what the punishment is.

- Isaac

From The Beat: How do people who do bad stuff "learn something?" Do you think there should be no punishments since they don't work?

When I was Alone

One of the times where I felt lonely was when I was alone. I was in a mental hospital. I felt so alone because I didn't know the people that I was there with and I couldn't open up about nothing. I just felt so alone because in the nighttime nobody was there and I would just cry myself asleep because I couldn't handle the feeling.

Another time when I was feeling lonely was when I lost one of my really good friends. I would tell her everything and she was the only person I would ever open up to. And once I lost her, I felt like I couldn't talk to no one.

-Anon

From The Beat: Both those times sound so lonely. Do you have people you can talk to now? We are so sorry you lost your friend. Thank you for sharing your lonely times! We know it will help some readers feel less lonely.

Influence

What influenced me is my brothers who I grew up with. Why? Because I have so many memories with all of them. When we were all in the same school, middle school to high school.

I have eight brothers. Three blood brothers. Others with a different mom and dad. We all used to go hella places. Rockin' Jump, paintball, movies, shopping, and going out the way.

They influenced me the most because they've been in my life since we was in diapers. We are all athletes who play football and basketball. But you know I'm the best outta all my brothers. All of my brothers and I are goofy and from Oakland.

-Fornite

From The Beat: Sounds great to have so many brothers and be so close to each other for so long. How do you think you would have been different without your brothers? Did you influence them, too? Were all the influences good things?

Loneliness Makes You

When you're lonely you're lost. There's people around, but you don't feel them there. You wanna go, but wanna stay. You're not so sure if you're feeling good or bad. You care too much about everyone else's feelings that you forgot about your own. You're drowning in your thoughts and you see yourself underwater trying to get to the top. But you just keep sinking.

Sometimes you start smiling, but it's not real. Your smile is so fake that you never know if it's a real one. You're watching the ones around you dying or stop loving you. Yes, it hurts but you learn to make it your everyday life. You learn to leave as it is and live with it and you wait 'til someone comes to pick you up out of one-hundred.

You wait for the love!

-Che-kwis

From The Beat: This piece is really powerful. It made us remember and feel our lonely times. Reading some of the other CURYJ writing about loneliness makes us see other solutions besides just waiting for love. Does working with CURYJ make you feel less lonely?

This Is What It Is

Loneliness means sadness because one has no friends or company. Loneliness is a feeling of depression. Being lonely doesn't mean not having anyone next to you. It's not having someone to talk to. It means feeling sad at night realizing you have no one to tell anything to without having the fear of disturbing. It's being surrounded by a crowd of people feeling like no one notices you or feeling like you don't belong there. Loneliness is being unable to communicate, feeling like no one is actually hearing you.

Loneliness isn't always something bad, being alone you figure out who you really have, you figure out who you really are. You think about all the things that go on and all the things around. Sometimes you have to be alone to understand what alone is. You have to learn, fall and cry. Being alone teaches you to be independent. It's being away from all the horrible things in the world. It's okay to be alone to learn to love yourself.

-YBfavoriterider

From The Beat: You nailed "loneliness" and beautifully! Sounds like you are making a distinction between being lonely and being alone. We agree sometimes it's good to be alone. Does being alone sometimes help you to be with people other times?

Loneliness Virus

Loneliness to me is no one with you or you have to talk and spend time with.

Most people in jail have no family to vent to people who aren't in jail and may catch loneliness by neglect. Depression can come from family or friends relationships.

Sometimes people think they're in this world alone, but they are not.

-Dawa

From The Beat: We love the idea of loneliness being a virus that you can "catch." When people are not alone but think they are, who's there for them they are not seeing?



"Untitled" by Caden

CURY J, OAKLAND, CA



"UFO" by Mark

Stay Out the Light If It's 2 Bright

Life is like a puzzle.... Now that's a deep thought.
Confused about where to go next. It feels like yo' feet caught.
Momma's voice on my mind, tellin' me to be smart.
Still at the sideshows. I can show you the street marks.

It's a lot of doors in life. You just gotta find the keys.
But on the other hand, some of the doors are make believe.
Tryna take over our oxygen away, choppin' down the trees. Freeze!!!!
Put yo' hands up and on yo' knees.

75 percent of my friends then heard that before being expelled,
suspended, and that's fo' sure.
Now, don't get me wrong, I ain't saying that to brag or boast,
Bringing my family all the way, I'm talking coast to coast.

-TD

From The Beat: We understand about feeling stuck! What are the doors you want to find the keys for?

School Warriors

Going to school ain't easy. I recognize that it's hard to follow rules that don't seem fair. But I wish I hadn't skipped so much of it. I wish I could go back and hustle before the stress. To be able to be eligible to submit applications for UC's (University of California) or private schools. I wasn't, though.

Thankfully, I got the chance for community college and CSUs (California State Universities). I missed gaining knowledge because I was lazy. My mental health was off. I overall wasn't okay. I should've took care of myself. Could've took time out of my day to breathe. To calm my nerves, fire up some sage and relax. That wasn't so much to ask. Taking some time for me out of the day could've made a change.

I should've asked for help before I reached my breaking point. I should've spoke to someone. I wish I could go back and listen. Listen to my ancestors trying to warn me. My eyes were closed. My ears were covered by my hands. My mouth was shut. I felt like no one would understand. I was wrong.

To do over high school in general would be nice. But now I kind of know why it ain't come easy to me. So I could learn and teach others.

I speak for the youngsters that had it hard in school, believing that doing other things that were probably bad was easier. Y'all ain't alone. Ponte las pilas, lil' warriors.

- Cristina

From The Beat: We know a lot of Beat readers can relate to what you wrote. Thank you for making sure they know they are not alone. Can you tell us more about why high school wasn't easy for you? Is school easier now because you're taking better care of yourself? Or is it more complicated than that?

Changes of Isaac

Dear Me:

The things that I would do over is not always going to school. The reason why I would change that is because now I'm on probation for not going to school and that's not right. The police want to lock kids up who didn't even do a crime.

If I would do it over, I would do it over before I got locked up. But they should not lock up kids that didn't do a crime. Just for not going to school. The reason why I would do this over is because I don't want to go to jail over school. I just want to play football and go to college and make my family proud and move my mom out of Oakland.

To the people who read this: Police officers want you to go to jail and they want to see you in prison. They don't want to see you happy. They want you in them cells.

That's my do over and just don't do the same thing you went to jail for.

- Isaac

From The Beat: We agree! Kids should not go to jail just for not going to school. And now? Did you find a way to be in school, play football and head to college?

Outsmarted

I'm quiet but people judge me by the way I look. I don't let that phase me, 'cause as I'm sitting down, I look around and see the true color on people's faces.

When looking back, I wasn't careful when I was picking friends. I'm not stupid, the way people would talk to me. I know what message they're trying to send.

For those who were by my side, I hope you ride with me until the end of time.

- DeAngelo

From The Beat: How do you see the true color on people's faces? How do you pick friends now?

You Can

Hello to myself,

I want you to do better in the next few years.

I want you to set all problems aside and look forward for what will get you farther than anyone else in the family has done.

I want you to make not just the family proud, but the community as well. Show them that the impossible is Possible.

Inspire you and your loved ones around you that you can.

...You can....

-JM

From The Beat: You can! We love that you want to make you community proud as well as your family. What will make you proud of yourself, though? What does it mean to "go farther"? Go where, exactly?

A Letter to a New Me

Dear Me:

I hope to have my dream car.

I hope to have a big house.

I hope I have everything I dreamed for.

I hope I will never see a day in jail/prison.

I hope I have a good job.

I hope I will forever ride bikes.

I hope to get my family out of the streets.

I hope to put them in a better place.

I will never hope to see my family in prison/jail.

I hope I will see my future and what I want to do with my life.

I will hope to tell the old me that all the bad stuff I do or did I wouldn't do again

and that I make better choices.

I hope to see a scholarship with my name on it.

-Israel

From The Beat: We love your hopes! We love how they include your family and how varied they are. They are all also achievable! How are you working on them already?

CURYJ, OAKLAND, CA

Keep It 125%

Dear 25-Year-Old Me,

Please tell me that you have coke-white Air Force Ones on your feet, blue Levi's and a white T. You never really dressed girly except for the times where you were going out somewhere nice or wanted to get a fine lookin' ninja's attention. You always wore the same colors, which were black, white and grey. I hope no one made you change how you dress or made you step out of character.

You're a real ninja. You love dressing comfortable and chasing after them thick-booty women with your bros. You never really cared for ninjas, only one time. He made you feel like you didn't have to change who you were. He liked you for you. You loved the feeling he gave you. But moral of the story: You're not made for no ninja. You never was. I hope you're not with one.

I hope you are living your best life with your dream car. You would tell every one of your bro's you wouldn't have it. You've dreamed about it most of your life. I hope you're still riding bikes. You love the bike life, the people you've met in it and how it changed your life. You promised you would never stop riding 'til the day you take your last breath. Bike life is you. It's what you do. It's what you're good at. But I know for a fact you're on a dirt bike.

I hope you have a beautiful woman. Not crazy. Not tryin' to kill every last one of your friends 'cause them the type of girls you've loved. You loved crazy 'cause that's how you are, the lifestyle you lived and the people you were around. You better have had a girl that's ready to pop off no matter where or what time. I hope she's smart and got class.

I want to tell you to live your life. To take chances and to let go of fear. Fear holds you back from doing the things you love. Don't stop going hard. Don't stop riding bikes. Don't stop smoking weed. Make bank and be happy!

- YBfavoriterider

From The Beat: This is beautiful! We love the general message of "Stay yourself." We think you have a good sense of who you are. We hope it becomes easier and easier to be true to you.

"Change? Shhh I guess change is good for any of us"- Tupac Shakur

My mother's been trying to reach my lately
She's noticed where I've been lacking
Unconditionally, she loves me and corrects me
This rosary on my neck, gives me spiritual protection
I know she'll protect me from myself
See, sometimes I do things I consciously know are wrong
But don't blame me, though, I'm only a person
My contradictions are part of a human experience
I don't want to be deep or nothing
I just want to speak my truth
'Cause I've peeped things that have given me some insight
On how life works
My pops used to always say, "Life isn't fair"
And I've finally accepted that as fact
So I try to work with it, instead of being goofy
And reckless
I'm just thankful, because all these things
Have helped me understand myself more
I'm more reflective and cautious of where I put my energy
I'll try to listen as much as I can
but I know I'll make mistakes
I'm just hoping and praying
It's never something I can't walk back from
This page will hold my thoughts, until I finally
Put into practice
I hope my mother sees how I'm tryin' to change.

- Jose

From The Beat: We are pretty sure she sees it. We love how you admit that you might fail, that you are only human, that you are trying. What advice would you give a younger person who thinks there is no point in trying because life isn't fair?

Just A Story To Tell

Do you ever stay up late at night? Replaying certain words or scenarios in your head so much that minutes fly by the dozen? Next thing you know, it's three in the morning, no change what-so-ever. Just the way you see yourself.

Growing up, I always enjoyed my life. Suddenly I'm in the present and I look back at a chunk of my life, a blurry chunk. I don't even know how it was possible for me to be so careless. If I could do that huge chunk of my life over, I would. Half of me would.

It all started when I was in eighth grade. I was hanging out with the wrong group of people. Misguiding my own path, knowing I was doing so. I remember one day my mom told me she was getting me a permanent plane trip to Mexico. Mind you, I'd never been to Mexico, never met a soul in that land. I kept doing things I wasn't supposed to be doing. Weeks passed and I came home one day hearing the words, "Have you packed yet?" My heart jumped out of my chest. She was serious.

Next thing I knew, I was in a one way trip to live with "family" I never met. That whole plane ride was torture, thinking I was never going to see my family again. Man, did I regret everything at that point. I felt like a worthless piece of crap for putting my mom through all that pain, to the point where she had to send me away. I tried making the best out of it, living there.

Here's a quick run-down of what I went through. My cousins were nice at first. Not for long. They said I thought I was all that just 'cause I was from the USA (not true!). I met a friend that I would lean on. He was really my peace, living in a toxic environment. One day, my cousin made me snap. I almost ripped her head off. That was the last straw. I was going to get sent back to Hayward CA, finally! Me and my friend hung out one last time. My aunt made assumptions and said me and him had to get married. WTF? I thought it was a joke. No, seriously. She made me move in with him. Now I really felt as if I was never going to see my mom again.

I found my way back, and that's all that matters. I did hold a grudge against my parents for a while. But it was my fault. I dug my own hole. I'm glad I didn't get married to my friend in Mexico. But if I could do over every single step that led to that point, I would. I been nothing but responsible, since. And I sleep better at night knowing I haven't gone back to my old ways. Never going back to juvenile either. That chunk of my life never existed. It's all a story now.

- Alejandra

From The Beat: Thank you for this story. It is inspirational. We so often read in The Beat the desire to change. So it's great to read, "I've changed." You had to go through a lot to get there. And the work is never done. But that, too, is inspirational. What's next, Alejandra? We look forward to hearing what is happening now and where you are headed. We know it's towards great things.

I Didn't Want Tomorrow

When I was fifteen years old, I never believed I'd see eighteen and I was hopeless and didn't dream enough to believe in myself nor a future where I existed it was difficult and it was a vacancy of my soul that didn't permit my fifteen-year-old heart to see my body in any future outside of that block where I stood with a bottle of drink and the homies and my pistol and the pain that lay dormant in a heart that knew only who to hate and who to punish with my hurt and my shame and the truth that I didn't want a tomorrow or to love myself or be worthy or believe or hope or dream or see myself in any future. So I stood there with the vacancy in my soul, with my homies and my pistol and with each drink I felt it reach down and numb my soul and I didn't want eighteen and I didn't want tomorrow.

- Miguel Quezada, CURYJ Regional Organizer

From The Beat: You know that so many, too many, readers will relate to your words. What these readers may not relate to, yet, is the beautiful success you have achieved, after tough times, with your family and your job and your freedom. You don't say it in this piece, but we know how very happy you are to have reached beyond eighteen and we know you have hope for, and belief in, everyone's future.

CURY J, OAKLAND, CA

Dedication But No Message

When you ask me, "Hey, gee, what are you dedicated to?"
I stop and realize I been dedicated to being elevated
But at the moment I can't give you a specific message
But I been dedicated to always better my family, myself,
and community
But at the moment I can't give you a specific message
My body is in a mixed trans telling me but you are still hungry
But for what?
I feel like I am still messing up
I am dedicated but at the moment I can't give you a specific message
Just that this is me speaking for transitional youth
To the folks who can't see or hold our truth
That it takes time to pull ourselves out of these lies into a new you

- Xocheezy

From The Beat: You say it so well: It takes time. We've seen you grow in these pages, so we can say with confidence that you are NOT messing up. Like you say, you are in transition. And, in our experience, when we do the real, complicated, hard work on ourselves and for our community, fighting for that truth, we never stop being in transition.

Dedication, Motivation

I am motivated to get my driver's license. So I made sure I practiced to get my driving permit. So I can eventually start practicing to take my behind the wheel test.
I got my permit and started to practice for my behind the wheel.

- Ty

From The Beat: Congratulations! We know you'll have your license soon. Learning to drive is an excellent example of needing dedication. So many steps and so much practice needed! Do you enjoy driving?



"Roots of the World" by Patrick

Being Alone

Being alone;
It's depressing but fun
I am a different person
I am an overthinker
I think about crazy stuff
I feel suicidal
When I am alone
I don't feel myself
I can't trust myself
Nor I trust anybody else
So many broken pieces
I feel empty inside myself
I feel like an old lonely lady
People could see my struggle
But they aren't able to feel my pain
Being alone isn't the best
But I love it.

-Leli

From The Beat: If being alone is so hard, why do you love it? Because people don't understand you? So you might as well be alone? We'd love to hear more about what makes you special.

Trust

I trust my grandmother and only her
When I get close to others, it feels like a curse
Mom died when I was three, it just made shhh worse
Opened up to a therapist to reveal all the pain and the hurt
I thought what we talked about was confidential
She told her supervisor
How that work
I feel like trust is a very powerful word because it shows the strength and belief in someone or something.

- Brezo

From The Beat: We think it's awful that the therapist broke your trust! We hope that doesn't turn you off all therapists. We totally agree that trust is a very powerful word. It shouldn't be used lightly, right?

Should of stayed in school!

I wish I could tell 12-year-old Ty how important school was and to just get through it, no matter what it takes. Just graduate.
Instead, I skipped school to be a fool. And I'm all grown and back in school.

- Ty

From The Beat: How do we tell 12-year-olds what's best for them in a way they can hear? What did you learn from "being a fool" that is important and you couldn't learn in school? Certainly being grown shouldn't stop anyone from being in school. We all always have more to learn.

Thoughts on Guns

Funny, how we applaud a coward with a vest and a Wesson
But shame men of color who by glocks for protection
It's always a double standard when it comes to my people
Maybe if I had a badge and fair skin then I'd be equal
They don't practice what they preach
They would rather leave us all deceased
Face down on the ground, telling stories we don't believe
Lil' piggy said the phone was a gun and that's the reason why he shot
But they won't give him ten-to-life. That's for the homies on the block

- Luis

From The Beat: We hear you and see this double standard. You don't tell us, though, what YOU think of guns.

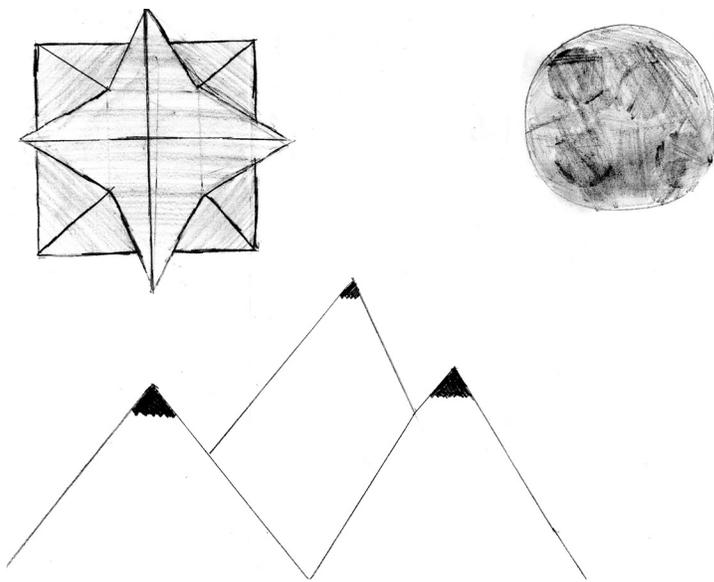
CURYJ, OAKLAND, CA

A World Without Borders

In San Leandro, they look at me different
 At least in the Town no one questions where I'm from.
 I can't link these two communities, 'cause they are too different
 I can only stand between both and hope one of them accepts me
 I hate this idea of traveling both worlds
 It reminds me of my parents and where they're from
 And those places don't feel like home either
 But I gotta preserve it for them
 'Cause borders hurt more when they're physical
 And I've seen how they've hurt my people
 So I'll play both sides and bring my own shit to both
 'Cause borders hurt more when they're physical
 And I've seen how they hurt my people
 So I'll play both sides and bring my own shhh to both
 'Cause I'm from both. I got experiences from both.
 And both sides can learn something from me.

- Jose

From The Beat: We love that last line! So true. We hope you are accepted everywhere and that you can create your home wherever you choose to. Borders hurt, but people will always be different from one another. How can we cross these borders more easily?



"Time" by Elijah

The Man That Farted on the Bus

My name is Hayden Beaulieu. A lot of readers know me as the guy who was locked up in Arizona. Some of you also know that I recently got my case overturned and that I also got the law changed in Arizona so that kids don't go to adult jails and prisons as easily as they used to.

Well, now I'm back in the East Bay. I'm getting settled in and used to everything and I've even become a workshop facilitator for The Beat. So if you see me around Oakland, don't be afraid to say, "Hi."

Today, I was on the bus towards CURYJ and it was packed. Smelly bodies from work and school all together don't create a pleasant situation. I was standing behind a large man when he cut the cheese. I don't want this to sound weird, but I felt relieved. The man who farted on the bus helped me to realize that it's finally okay to appreciate the small daily freedoms of life

- Hayden

From The Beat: "The small daily freedoms of life." Many readers will know what you mean. And even those who have never been locked up will maybe appreciate the daily freedoms of life more thanks to your writing. Maybe even the next time someone farts!

Powerful

The most powerful person to impact my life and that I met would have to be my principal from my high school. He listened and actually made a difference in a lot of young lives. Took our feelings and what we spoke out on into consideration and if he agreed, he would make it a priority to get back on it as soon as he was able to.

I'm sure we all know what it feels like to have someone in a high power not take what you're saying into any consideration. My high school principal Mr. Henz, believe it or not, had one of the biggest impacts in my life by just listening and even the slightest change would make a big impact on others and me. Made people feel comfortable and want to learn. Never agreed with kicking students out if they were a little late or lock the door, because the more they took our class time away, the more we could have been learning. We're there to learn not to get in trouble.

Someone so small in this world could make the biggest difference to so many people and that is so powerful in my eyes.

-Bianca

From The Beat: We love hearing about Mr. Henz! He's inspiring. But, why is it so rare for adults to just listen? When you work with younger young people do you try to listen the way Mr. Henz did?

Dear Judges and Prosecutors

Step on me and my dreams
 Imagine the ignorance of power
 Break the fragile glass that supports me
 But first, you need to learn my name

Who am I?
 Where am I from?
 Why am I here?
 Not a generalization
 Not an opinion
 Just give me the facts

You don't know anything about me
 You only see the paperwork
 Who are you?
 Do I know you?
 Why do you judge me like this?

Practice comprehension
 Rather than ignorance
 Believe in the people
 Rather than the system

Learn about the people you judge
 Before you betray your own roots
 You were once a child
 You were once a delinquent
 You were once an immigrant
 You were once betrayed

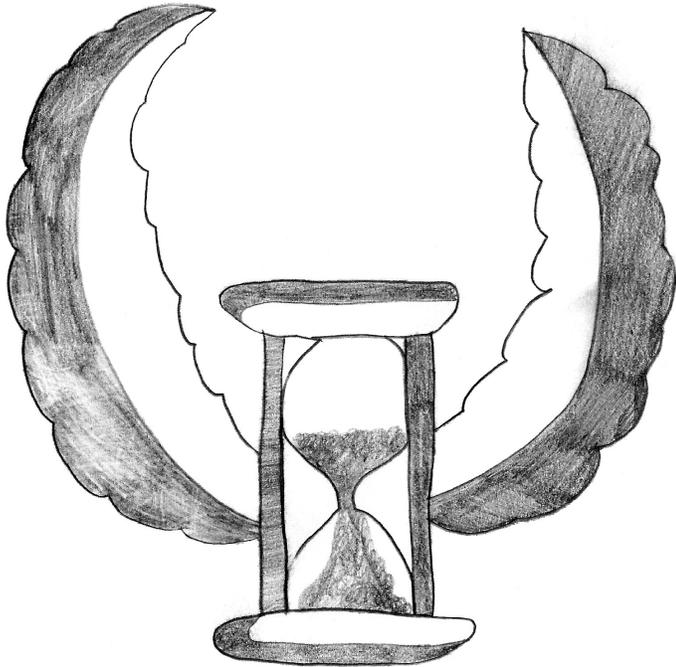
Sanity comes from without
 You cannot displace the blame
 Just be real for the sake of society
 The day you befriend those you've hurt
 Is the day that justice has been done

Lift us up for who we are
 Don't break us down for what we're not

-Hayden

From The Beat: We love the way this piece asks people with power to both see the humanity in others and to admit to their own humanity. Do you try to see who they really are?

CURY J, OAKLAND, CA



"Time" by Elijah

Loneliness

I describe this as being the only one with this mindset. I appreciate the fact that because of state laws, I was able to graduate from high school. But I don't appreciate how the government set my standards low.

If anything, I have been able to prevail so that should prove my value. I shouldn't have people trying to make me feel less than because of the trauma and mistakes that I have felt or done in the past.

-Evelyn

From The Beat: You don't need to prove your value to us! We agree that standards shouldn't be lowered for people who have had a hard time. Some people might just need more support than others. We know you will continue to prevail!

Left Behind?

More Like a Time for Self-Growth

I have left a couple of people behind in my life. There was a pattern in what time I would cut people off. It would usually be in a time of growth or self-reflection. Usually the people I would cut off would be toxic to my self-being.

It takes a lot for me to cut someone off because I am a really forgiving person. You must have really messed up. A lot of people who I have cut off in my life, I cut them off permanently. Also, a lot of the time they try to re-enter my life. It's awkward when that happens because, like I said, I am a really forgiving person and nice. I'm good with confrontations, I'm respectful. But I won't really want to be close to you or talk to you.

There's only one or two people I've really let back in my life because I cut them off too quick with little self-reflection. I feel like it's a habit that I'm not really perfect at, but there's room for improvement.

To cut people can either be a time for growth or it can be taken in any direction. I personally used it as a factor towards growth. Maybe you can, too.

-Ania

From The Beat: We think this is a really useful way to think about cutting people off and love how thoughtful you are. How do people "really mess up?" Were these friends? Family?

Left Behind

I been left behind before.

Probably because I needed it.

Probably because I caused it.

It's good, though. I know everything happens for a reason. I know not everyone is meant to stay in my life.

To my old friends, I hope you're doing good. No love, but no hate either. We don't see eye to eye anymore and that's okay. Y'all never knew me like that, to understand in the first place. I'm cool because I know I'll never act like y'all did in these situations. Bickering and gossiping is an act for those that are less than G's. And I ain't ever had to compete 'cause y'all not me. Questions and speculations I have will never be answered and maybe I need to let this go.

See, I been left behind before.

Aye, RIP to my grandparents y'all. They left too soon. Before I could create more memories. Before I could learn their wisdom. I think they could've really taught me somethings. Consejos de abuelos hit hard when you're going through it. I always feel their presence. I know they are with me. But I wish I had a chance to go back to Mexico to see them. Sometimes I smell something that reminds me of my grandma's house. Sometimes my mom tells me how I remind her of my grandpa.

This is for people who have left too soon.

For females that I've dated, I apologize. I understand why you're feeling like you do. I can't explain why I do what I do, but my intention was never to hurt you. You hurt anyways, and that's why you with him. You still wear that necklace I gave you. So I know I'm not going nowhere. I just gotta separate myself before I do this to someone else.

It feels like a curse. Everyone I've tried to love, ends up hurt.

So I've been left behind.

Probably because I needed it.

Probably because I caused it.

-Rich

From The Beat: This piece is so honest and tender. We can't imagine that you are cursed. Life and relationships are just hard. You are so thoughtful, though, you must be a good friend. Do you have good friends now?

Left Alone

Loneliness is when you're left alone. When you feel you have no one. I feel I have no one, that I am all alone and I have no one but myself.

I felt alone when I was in foster care. I felt alone because I had no one but my siblings and I couldn't see none of of my family but my siblings who were there with me. We got taken away from the only person that helped me feel at home. I only had my brothers at the time.

I didn't think I would have my family whole again and I was told that if we went back we wouldn't be together. I always felt lonely and that I would always be alone.

- Tay Teezy

From The Beat: This is such a good example of loneliness. Being taken from one's family might be the worst kind of lonely. Is your family back together? Do you still feel lonely?

Loneliness/Depression/Sail

Prisoners feel lonely in prison. They don't have nobody really to talk to. That's how they fall in to depression. That's also why prisoners have suicidal thoughts. I think that's why some prisoners take their own life away. I think they need more help. Someone to speak to them and also someone to give them advice, give them motives to keep on living.

I have this experience because my homeboy is still waiting for his trial to start. And he tells me the way they get treated in there. How they don't get help or how they do not have someone to talk to. The way that the police officers don't care if they find someone dead in jail.

-Anayeli

From The Beat: We are sorry that your friend is inside and not getting the support he needs and are glad that he has you. How are you making sure he doesn't feel alone?

CURYJ, OAKLAND, CA



"New Chances" by Spikey

Family Life

Some people I left behind was half my family. It was for the best because they only wanted problems and I didn't like it. They would create lies and rumors all over the family and that made me think that my own family instead of supporting you they're talking bad about you.

Your own family can bring you down when you think they have your back. We, the people, always depend on family. But imagine if you can't depend on them when you most need them. In this world, you only have yourself and only yourself because you can't depend on no one. It's sad to leave your family behind, but to move on, you need to let go.

- Ashley

From The Beat: That sounds so hard. It was only half your family, though? Can you depend on the other half? Have they tried getting back in your life?

Back To My Mother

My mother's really the one who carried me
and brought me to this world
I wonder if she was to predict the tricks and tribulations
She would have created a Map Mural
For me and my siblings
But we wouldn't learn as our own unique selves
We wouldn't be able to turn the world into our unique tales
So I steady move and groove and already to be ready
Because never again I want to see her stomach empty
Back to my mother, we got you
We got you
You never had to see me fail
And my mother's wish would really be to see each of her kids rise

- Xocheezy

From The Beat: This is beautiful. We love the idea of a Map Mural. Are you making one for your younger siblings/future children? But you are right, we all need to learn in our unique ways for our unique tales. The Beat is honored to have followed your tale over the years!

Loneliness

I feel like a time where people tend to feel lonely is when they lose someone important in their life or when they need someone the most.

For example, when a boy who loses his father and is going through changes in life or a new experience, he needs someone to talk to, to help through the process and sometimes some things cannot be said to the mother.

Some ways that you can be helped is having someone there for you who is going to support you through the good and bad times. Also, talking about the problem and doing things that will get your mind off the problem.

- Hilario

From The Beat: This is a really good example of loneliness. We agree it's good to both talk about problems and get your mind off them sometimes, too. Are you someone people can talk to when they are feeling lonely?

Norba's Ezam

Life is a dawggie dawg world.
Will you make it out the maze (uh)
Dare to be different, not afraid (yea)
They say money forever and love fades (for real)
Sounds like a cliché. Through the pain
Choose your own faith (dawg)
Life changed when I stopped saying grace
Missing parts in my body got my mind starving
Like where the pieces lay (damn)
Hard not to be a product of your environment living in the Bay (will will)

- Bird

From The Beat: What parts in your body were you missing? What are you feeding your mind with now? Is money really forever? How does that work? We are all products of our environment. We're glad you are trying to be you.

Obstacles

In my life I experienced my mother passing at age three, dad leaving after she died and growing up without him. I had to learn how to keep my head up every day, watching kids walk home with their mom and dad.

I have seen people hurt others over envy and jealousy. I would tell my twelve-year-old self to watch out for the fake love. The closest to you could switch up at any time. My younger self could benefit from my older self because I'm more assertive and communicate better.

My journey's been bumpy and rocky. I caught my first charge at twelve. I met a lot of people who are motivated to help the youth. We connect because we're on the same page. My twelve-year-old self needs to know that blood's thicker than water which means just because there's blood don't mean they care and love you.

-Brezo

From The Beat: We are so glad you shared this part of your story with The Beat. Readers will find your strength and determination as inspiring as we do. What's next for you, Brezo? Tell us more about how you (and CURYJ) are helping the youth.

Punishment

Punishment works sometimes
when they take your phone or take something that you really use.
Punishment doesn't work when they whoop you or tell you to go to your room.
For me, whoopings don't work
because they give you more anger
and for me, make me wanna fight or go do bad things.

- Izzy

From The Beat: That makes sense to us. Does the threat of a whooping change your behavior?

Reach Out to Us!

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FRESNO BARRIOS UNIDOS, FRESNO, CA

Fresno Barrios Unidos

Fresno Barrios Unidos transforms communities by empowering youth and families through advocacy, education, and wellness. We are inclusive, respectful, and appreciative of the youth and families we serve.

FBU is a community benefit organization that has been serving the community for over 23 years, with an array of programs and services addressing the needs of the community.

Our goal is to provide young people with the skills and opportunities they need to thrive in their communities and give back with an approach that is holistic, culturally sensitive, and inclusive of all.



Being Picture Perfect Isn't Doing You Any Good

Marinarde, don't ever forget you are dope. This is the new you. Keep moving forward. I know it's been hard but keep it going. I really hope that you don't allow other people's opinions move you back. This has been one of the hardest things you'd had to do. I can say for about over two years now, you tried Mari, you really did. You tried to be happy. You knew love was still there but it was different.

See, even though you tried so hard to make it work and be happy, you were not doing it for you. You constantly did it for everyone else. Never really for yourself. Please don't look back. This is the new you. Keep letting her grow. Also remember your son loves you, he needs a happy, strong mother. Being picture perfect isn't doing you any good.

-MJ

From The Beat: We couldn't agree with you more, that striving to make other people happy will only hurt us in the long run. Your son is very lucky to have a strong, independent, and thoughtful mother like you. We'd love to hear more about what you do to make you truly happy!

It's a Process

I was only sixteen at the time. I know that doesn't excuse my actions, but being only sixteen, I swore the world revolved around me. I know now that everyone grieves in their own way and I was still in the denial phase.

I remember walking into the hospital ICU waiting room. I remember seeing all my cousins sitting on the chairs next to their parents. I remember worrying about class the next day, it was already late and I still had to get ready for class the next day. But nothing would prepare me for the news my mom would give us that night - but who can honestly be prepared to find out their grandfather had forty-eight hours to live before his lungs would give out, even with life support?

If I could go back to that night and take back everything I said, I would. From the "screw this hospital, I knew they wouldn't help him." To the "How could he leave me so soon? He knows I don't graduate until next June!"

They say grief is a process and sometimes you take a couple steps back before finally being able to move to the next phase, but sometimes our grief gets the best of us, and our reactions can be uncalled for.

-Ana

From The Beat: We're so sorry for the loss of your grandpa, especially when you were so young. It's true that grief does get the best of us, and it's unfortunate that there isn't much space in our society to grieve openly and comfortably. Forgive yourself for acting the way you did, and carry your grandpa's spirit with you as you grow.

Screw Colorism

When I think about the opportunity to do over something from my past, I think about having a different relationship with myself. If I could, I would go back and be kind to myself. I would stop, reflect, and heal. All things I never provided to myself. I would tell elementary school me that it's okay to wear that yellow shirt I liked so much regardless of how "dark" it might make me look. It wasn't until 2017 that I said, screw colorism, I love yellow.

I would do over all those lonely hours locked up in the restroom and instead ask for help. As an adult, I continue to struggle with confidence and self-love, but if I could I'd go back and make sure younger me didn't.

-Jenny

From The Beat: Being kind to ourselves is so important, and you've learned some necessary steps on exactly how to do that. We're glad that you know when to ask for help. For the record, we also think yellow is a great color.

Ever-changing

Donde estas y como te encuentras? Eres chingona
I applaud you for the distance you've gone and for the journey you've traveled
You are worthy
Recuerda que tu mama te quiere. Yo, te quiero
You are not unfinished but rather ever-changing

-Jenny

From The Beat: We also applaud you for the distance you've gone! Keep growing, evolving, and sharing your journey with us.



"Heaven" by Shandra

FRESNO BARRIOS UNIDOS, FRESNO, CA

Correcting the Wrong Choices

If I can ever get a do over
 I'd go back to correcting myself from making
 These poor decisions I made not too
 Long ago or when I was younger...
 If it was somehow possible to
 Change my mistakes, like getting
 Into the many fights in elementary
 And middle school, I'd go back
 To stop and tell myself to think
 About how this will not only affect me
 And my life, but the people I
 Fought with (and their) lives, how will this
 Help us in our life? What's the
 Point of this if you might never
 See each other again?
 This is what I'd tell not only me
 But other people like me as well!
 I'm happy that the new me is
 Better than the old me!

-Reyna

From The Beat: Your years have given you a lot of wisdom! We're glad to hear that you're happy about the new you. How will this new you work with others when you feel angry with or threatened by them?

You and I

During my third year at Yale, I was kicked out of school. Maybe "kicked" is too strong of a word - I'll say "strongly recommended to leave." And so I did.

The university saw this as a way to ensure I would graduate in six years (keep that 99% graduation rate!). My dean saw this as a way to address my increasingly debilitating anxiety and depression (she was right). To the old me: you are confused, you are sad, you are angry, and that's okay. To the new me: you are valid, you recognize mistakes, and ask for help. You understand your emotions.

To the current me: understand that you never have all the answers. To the current me: when you fail, you are not alone. When you fail you now know it is not a full representation of who you are.

You will continue to unpack general trauma and it will be hard. You will hang on to those that support you and learn to support others with compassion. You are growing. I am growing. We are growing.

-Marisa

From The Beat: Thank you, thank you for your wise and humble words. We wish more people knew that it was okay to be angry and sad. By keeping in mind that you don't have all the answers, you remain open to options and new truths.

Your Sacred Place

Don't you know that you are a queen?
 Don't you know that you are a warrior goddess?
 Don't you know that your womb is a sacred place?
 Don't you know that you are a divine being?
 Don't you know that the power of the universe resides inside of you?
 There is so much magic inside of you
 Not all are worthy to enter your sacred place
 Make sure the person you let in
 Is worthy to rule beside you
 Remember, you are in charge
 It's your world, Queen, you are in charge
 Don't you know, you are worthy?
 Always remember your self-worth

-JB

From The Beat: Yes! We love the feminine empowerment and the challenge in this piece - to recognize our self-worth, to take charge, and to embrace our greatness. Your confidence is inspiring, thank you for sharing it with us!

A Second Chance



"Second Chance" by Hayer

Make Your Dreams a Reality

"Go to UC Berkeley!" They said.
 "it is the best public university in the world!"
 "you've got higher than a 4.0
 And could do so much more!"
 But my heart is not in UC Berkeley
 My voice is more valuable than a 4.0
 Instead I'll show how valuable our stories are
 To the whole world.

-Nataly

From The Beat: Sometimes what others might think is "the dream" is not our dream. We're proud of you for recognizing what is and isn't your heart. Your story is valuable - keep sharing it and motivating others to do the same!

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FATHERS & FAMILIES OF SAN JOAQUIN, STOCKTON, CA

Fathers & Families of San Joaquin

Fathers & Families of San Joaquin (FFSJ) is a progressive, solution oriented community organization working on the front lines of racial justice, community healing, trauma-informed care, community re-entry, and education equity in the City of Stockton, the surrounding San Joaquin Valley, and throughout California.

In 2016, FFSJ expanded its work to open a historic Trauma Recovery Center in the heart of Stockton. It is one of only 22 free mental health centers in the country, helping victims of violent crimes access culturally rooted mental health treatment. With our dedicated team, we address intergenerational trauma and support families who have survived neglect, poverty and violence.

Together, we are reimagining what's possible for ourselves, our families, and our communities. We lead with purpose, passion and an unyielding commitment to our collective liberation.



Closer to My Loved Ones

I agree that people always say we need change, but not many people do anything about it because either they already love what they doing, or it's too late for them in their mindset. As for myself, I am very open minded to try drugs that I know aren't good for me, but the only reason why I did it was for my missed ones. When I smoke, it makes me sleepy and makes me feel closer to my lost ones. When smoking and taking pills, I saw that I was affect the loved ones that still live here on earth.

So I made a change for the better and for my family and life, by stopping myself from using. I also changed my mindset and the people I hang out with. Now I'm being more productive doing chores I usually wouldn't do, and being more involved in school and meeting new people in the world.

For my community, I love my city and the people that are in it. The way I help is by coming to Fathers and Families because I know they help the community in many ways.

-Eric
From The Beat: You have such a big heart, and are deeply connected to the people you care about. Stick with this positive change, and continue investing in yourself and your community. Great things are ahead for you!

My Message

Don't let shhh get to you!

Let it go.

Don't think just 'cause somebody says something, you fight them.

-Re
From The Beat: You're right! Some people just aren't worth your time.

Still A Raider's Fan

After I graduate, I'm looking forward to being a football player and finding my dreams. My favorite position is linebacker, though I always wanted to be like (quarterback) Derek Carr because he's good at the sport and all. When they move to Vegas I'll still be a Raiders fan.

-Reggie
From The Beat: You're a true fan! Keep striving for your dreams. We hope you can get that chance to play high school football too!

Don't Wait

Everything doesn't need a reaction. Don't wait to do something because it might be too late. I used to be mean to my sister. When I started to be nice to her, grandma took her away.

-Korri
From The Beat: These are wise words! We hope that you can connect with your sister again soon.

Everywhere I Go

"Gang member" - I hate this label. Just because my skin is brown and I have tattoos, I get labeled a gang member. They raided my mom's house and told her I am an active gang member. I get pulled over and asked what 'hood I'm from because the system says I am an active Norteño.

Everywhere I go, I get stereotyped. It bothers me so bad that I cut off my hair so I could have one less thing that makes me look like a gang member. It bothers me because most of my family are gang members, and I always told my mom I wouldn't ever be like them.

-Crande
From The Beat: That's so frustrating, and so demoralizing to be labeled this way by a system that has so much control. We believe in you, and know the great work you're doing for your community.

Getting Blamed

I get labeled as a bad kid by my teachers at school, and I try to show them I'm not.

I hang out with bad people, and when I'm with them I always get blamed or in trouble because I got suspended a lot of times.

For example, I got suspended this one time for being in the hall getting water, and that group of kids came in the hall and threw a chair at the wall, and they ran out and I got blamed and suspended.

-Deonte
From The Beat: What must you do to stop getting blamed for things you have not done? We hope you will continue on the right path of handling your business and proving to yourself and others you are not the label they attempt to put on you.



"Gilliland" by Mathew

FATHERS & FAMILIES OF SAN JOAQUIN, STOCKTON, CA

R&T Note

In a year or two from now I hope your happy and stronger. Dot it for you and Tito and nobody else. I hope everything you planning and dreaming for gets accomplished. I hope that once you move forward you don't look back.

Be happy, feel good about yourself and just know your not alone and that your not walking alone. With Tito and God are always walking with you. Don't let the people that hurt you back into your life you've been doing good so far so why toss it away over a person who don't give a shhh about you? Look at you, your good where you at. I hope you keep doing you. You and Tito will be fine. Don't trip and keep your head up.

-R

From The Beat: Your hard work and focus on little Tito will bring you both strength and success.

Resilient Woman

Dear Cero, hope all is well. Look old me, I love you. You made me almost dead but I lived and continue to stay strong. Love yourself, you will find your mother. You will just continue to push and not loose your soul. You came out threw a black hole to the light.

You are a resilient women. From locked up in 3 different jail systems, to being a community organizer. Nothing could break you, not even that man who tried to beat you to death. Hear you are speaking your testimony. You are strong and where you are now. How you made it where you are and how hard it is in your change as well. Triggers, people testing you, but you got this.

-Cero

From The Beat: Your strength and your work will inspire others everyday.

Unknown Letter

Life is hard and will get even harder when you are trying to be better But everything will be fine as long as you grind harder You are stronger because of all you went through Just remember you can do all things as long as you follow through God is by your side and won't ever leave you Especially in jail when you feel you are all alone So stay strong and stay true to yourself

-K

From The Beat: Your best advice and the secret to your success, is in your last line, stay strong and true to yourself.

My Patna (My Brother)

I used to spend every day with my patna. That changed real fast from decisions that can't be undone. From slappin' Mozzy's "Bladadah" in the car, mobbin' through Stockton, to writing letters to him and getting wise words in his letters with "state prison" stamped on the envelope. I don't blame him, he's human. He's still my number one supporter through the good times and the bad times. My patna!

I miss my patna. Even if he's at where he's at, he motivates me and I motivate him.

Coming to Fathers and Families since a youngin, it's like I have a bunch of brothers and sisters, family. Me and my pops come here to chill whenever, real down-to-earth people. They support me one hundred percent.

To give back I been volunteering here for a while. There's lots of things the people here taught me. I'm grateful for them because when my patna got locked up, it's like he's still out because I get the same support from them that I get from my patna.

-Star

From The Beat: We're so happy for you, to find so much love and wisdom from people in this program. You and your brother have such a strong relationship. Continue to nourish it, and give back to those who have provided for you.

How I Want My Life To Be

"On a mission your worst enemy is idle time." -Nipsey Hussle

This quote to me means that you're at a place in your life where you don't want to be, and you want to push yourself to get out of it. Yet you chose to waste your idle time – maybe not purposely but it still is a waste.

For me, I be in a daze just about how my life was, how it is now, and how I want my life to be in like five or ten years instead of doing something as simple as my homework.

-Star

From The Beat: It's easier to get the simple things done – like your homework – when you have a longer-term goal in mind. What are you pushing yourself for right now?

Changes

I would just tell myself to keep doing what I do best. Stay to myself, to the things that are going to help me in life like school and work. My old me would love the new me because I'm really not how I used to be. I just got back on track. Don't focus on the hate and the people who bring negativity to my life.

I love the person I am becoming and I'm going to continue to do it. For example, I got two jobs and I'm doing everything for probation, and I'm going to school. At one point I didn't do anything but steal and do bad things.

-Mystery Girl

From The Beat: Stay on your path to success, it sounds like you are going in the right direction.

Back Then

Back then I would get a lot of bad grades and get into a lot of fights. Soon, I got kicked out of school for a long time and my mom would stress out about it.

After that, I knew I was messing up. I wanted to make a change. I started getting good grades and joining programs that would help me.

-Nicolas

From The Beat: You were able to see the affect you were having on the people you care about, which shows a lot of maturity and compassion. We're proud of you!

I Know Who I Am

When I was locked up I was labeled as "a threat to society." But it didn't hurt me though, because whatever someone labels me as isn't true because I know who I am. I don't wanna talk about how it happened, because I don't like to put my business out there. And it didn't make me feel any type of way, to be honest with you.

I'm just gonna say that the people accused me for what my charges were, when I was locked up for three months in JJC.

-Aj

From The Beat: You're very confident in who you are. Are there times that you speak up for yourself to challenge other's labels?

Mindset

Before, I would always get into trouble for dumb reasons. But now I changed my mindset.

The reason I changed my mindset is because I don't want people to see me as a bad person. Now, people see me as a person who has changed – a leader, not a follower.

-Reggie

From The Beat: You made an amazing turnaround! We're so excited to be part of your journey, as you continue to lead.

FATHERS & FAMILIES OF SAN JOAQUIN, STOCKTON, CA



"Beautiful Beat" by Charlie

The Year

I hope 2019 will be the year I finally get my life together.

-Isaiah

From The Beat: Make it happen!

A Light Into My Darkness

This program did a lot for me, from teaching me how to see positivity in a world full of negativity, to realizing ain't nothing in the streets. It's crazy to me to know that so many people risk their life and freedom, thinking there is. Having been put in this program, it showed me how much impact the system has on people's lives.

Looking back on 2018, it was a year of growth and knowledge for me in a multitude of ways. Going to jail was one of the best things that happened to me while being the worst at the same time. It showed me that all the people you would go above and beyond for don't always feel the same way about you. A lot of times they act like it, but never really show it. My mama was the only one there when I get jammed up and that's the main reason I wanna get on my stuff and bless her. Even my mentor Raymond, he spoke a lot of stuff that really touched me, that allowed me to relate to him even though our lives was nothing alike. Made me see the fact that going to jail don't make you much more than an enslaved fool.

Being in certain situations were "OG's" put information into your head, but then not caring about your well-being when it all goes bad. A lot of things could be spoke on but I can't do it verbally. That's why I pick up the pen and paper. It lets me express my true self and my true emotions and thoughts that are running through my head when I feel like I can't turn to nobody else. Could go into depth but I don't have much time, so I'll just leave it here.

-Lz

From The Beat: You experienced so much growth last year, and speak a lot of wisdom in this piece. The sky is your limit. Stay true to yourself, and keep those who support you close by your side.

Deafly Loud

I'll remember 2018 as two years. This past year has taught me to wait, but not too late. Speak in the moment, not after the fact. Learn to bite your tongue and breathe it out. This wasn't a good year, as we all can agree.

Though I'm glad I had those last memories and can say the year has built me while it was breaking me. I'll never forget it. I will continue to grow from this. In a way, I'm glad the year happened or I wouldn't be really where I am today.

-Sheryl

From The Beat: The struggle makes us stronger and wiser. We're glad that even though this year was difficult, you're seeing it as an opportunity for growth. That shows a lot of maturity and self-love!

When They Get Old

There's a couple people I'd give back to, like my two uncles, my aunt, and my parents. My parents always have been there for me, all my life through ups and downs. My parents have always stuck by my side.

Also, my aunt and uncle, they are my God-parents and they've also always been there for me, especially through tough times in my life. As well as for my Uncle Raymond, he's helped me with things in life and always guides me in the right directions.

When I'm older and I'm working as a nurse in the military I will be getting paid good, so I will give back to them as well as taking care of them when they get old.

-Rayna

From The Beat: You have such a strong network of support, and a lot of gratitude for those around you. Keep them close!

This World We Live In

It's crazy

This world we live in

From the beautiful

To the corrupt

We wonder why we're here

All they do is hurt me

All they want is for me to fail

Yet here I am still with them

Here I am still going crazy

But let me tell you something

It's crazy

This world we live in

You'll find people going through the same thing you are

Losing their mind, just like you are

Hurting, just like you are

-Miss GThang

From The Beat: It's so important to feel like we're not alone, and to know that others understand us. We hope you have someone to talk to about this hurt, and that you're not keeping it bottled up inside.

Chillin' With My Momma

If there was one person I would like to give back to, it would be my mom. My mom has had my back through good terms and bad terms. One day I would like to give back to my mom by getting her a house or a car. Every time I am feeling mad or when I'm just frustrated, I just give her a call and I go over to her house. My mom's house is like my safe place. Go over to my mom's to get away from whatever I want to get away from, and at the same time I just be chillin' with my momma.

-Angel

From The Beat: We're sure your mom would appreciate a house or a car someday, but your gratitude for her is the best gift of all. Make sure you let her know how much you appreciate her!

FATHERS & FAMILIES OF SAN JOAQUIN, STOCKTON, CA

The Message

My mission in life is to be able to change the way someone thinks about their behavior. For example, let's say someone is thinking the wrong way when their opinions on certain topics is bad and their behavior is where they are doing things that they shouldn't be doing. I would try to change their mindset into something that is positive.

I believe that if you think positive then your actions will be positive. If I do that then I believe that I have finally found my reason that I was put here on earth to do.

-Peter

From The Beat: We agree thinking positive can create positive actions. What can people do to cancel out the negative thoughts and focus on the positive?

Letter to my Dad

I'm sorry you weren't raised right too.
 I'm sorry you were felt cold in the way you were
 I'm sorry you were with mom still
 Don't end up being sorry for not raising me, leaving me cold the ways you did
 Learn to accept that life isn't forever young, and people only have so many chances
 Despite you always giving everyone so many opportunities
 Learn who's going to really be there in the end
 Don't forget everyone's friends when drugs are involved
 Learn before it's too late to

-Ss

From The Beat: It's true that life isn't forever, and you offer some good advice to us. Stay open to learning the lessons of life - there are so many of them!

Letter to Dad

Dear Dad,
 Become what you said you want to be. With the year and some months that you knew me I would hope you would come to the conclusion to change your ways. I know you may try, but it seems to me when you try you do more than what I want you to do, and the things you get in trouble with.
 While you're sitting in that cell and you say you want to change and you'll do better, not knowing I heard those exact words before, not too long back. Because I always wanted a bond with my father I know I'll give in, but I know within I wouldn't take any more of the letdown.

-Malviney

From The Beat: You remain open to having a good relationship with your father, and you're also setting boundaries with what you will and won't tolerate. This is very mature and healthy! Keep us posted on what happens.

The Message

You are always evolving, growing, changing, and reaching to become your best self no matter what comes your way in your life. Becoming your best self is what keeps you pushing always.

When you grow up you are in constant confusion especially when stereotypes or racist remarks try to bring you down. You being to think about yourself in that way and think the world is against everything you are. No one to talk to or understand what you are really going thought. It takes time but those little words of encouragement can shift one's life in a positive way.

This is why I think it is important young people like myself unite and understand that life is a roller coaster, and if we unite and help each other out this life can help future generations and ourselves. We are so much bigger than what others think and say about us. Our journeys of becoming our best self never ends. We help inspire and aspire always.

-Amanie

From The Beat: We love what you say about the importance of young people uniting, and we agree that small words of encouragement can shift one's life in a positive way. Keep offering your encouraging and inspirational words to others!

Distracted in School

A bad habit I would like to change about myself is being very distracted. I get distracted easily, especially in class. I will sit in class and if it's really quiet or noisy I will get distracted. If I wasn't so distracted easily, I feel like I would do better in school.

-Rayna

From The Beat: It's hard not to get distracted! What is it that grounds you in your day-to-day life?

Loyalty

Once you go into the system, things got to change. It's not your house, you can't do things. Before, I was a hot boy, I felt like I was the shhh, like no one could mess with me. It's like a stage, everybody gotta go through a stage.

When I went in, I already knew what time it was. You gotta eat nasty food, you gotta work out to stay solid, can't get up without permission. Basically you're wearing all the same clothes, gotta be good to get points.

I realized who was there for me, who really cares about me. At the end of the day, the only people there for you are your family. People aren't real friends, they're just there to claim you, say they know you. A lot of people like attention. They like to be known. I don't need to be known. I still get down, but I stay smooth. A lot of people aren't your friends.

I got me and my family, that's all I care about. Your own blood over everything. At the end of the day, they gon' talk 'bout you. To me, my biggest thing is loyalty. Death before dishonor.

-Lil A

From The Beat: Getting locked up was a big wake-up call for you! With this knowledge now, you'll be able to maintain focus on what's important to you. Stick to the people who want to see you succeed!



"Helping Hands" by Donald Thompson

FATHERS & FAMILIES OF SAN JOAQUIN, STOCKTON, CA



"Untitled" by Cie-Cie

Success

I would be picking that success is not final failure is not a fatal quote. I feel like I can relate to this and this is true. I failed a lot in my life but tried to be successful all the time no matter how many times I failed. I would keep going 'till I make it and now that I go back and look at everything it was hard.

I would always fail with school, talking to my dad, I just felt like I didn't have nobody to understand me or that I could actually talk and vent to. I got better in school talking to the principal about my grades and she helped me pass my classes. She talked to me about her problems so I wouldn't feel alone. Also my mom was so supportive with everything, she was like my backbone, spine, and I love her for that.

-Nylani

From The Beat: We appreciate you sharing your life obstacles and identifying people in your life who support you. What advice would you give someone else who is having a hard time in school?

Make It Out

"On a mission, your worst enemy is idle time." – Nipsey Hussle

This quote is saying that you're doing nothing when you should be doing stuff that is helping you out of the struggle. But to "make it out" you have to have a game plan for what you are doing and if you stick to your plan and do it right, then there shouldn't be no idle time. Only time you should have is your resting time for all the hard work you been doing. But if you don't have a game plan, then you ain't going to get nothing done 'cause it's going to be hard to accomplish anything.

-Peter

From The Beat: We totally agree with you! What game plan do you have for yourself, that you're sticking to right now?

All Gas No Breaks

A mistake that I can't undo is when I got into it with my pops. I want to write about this topic because I learned my lesson not to mess with the bull, because then you will get the horns.

The way I try to keep the scale even is by getting school done and getting money in the house and supporting my loved ones to do their best. From experiencing this lesson, it has changed me to be more generous and to keep it grinding. All gas, no breaks!

-Reckless

From The Beat: You've got your mind straight and you're on the right path! Keep supporting your loved ones and pursuing your education. We're behind you all the way!

Carry On the Traditions

When I was younger, we had plenty of family gatherings. Mother's Day, Father's Day, Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas. As I got older, those celebrations kind of started to stop. I remember as a little kid it used to be so much fun, running around and around with all my cousins playing, laughing, begging our parents "just one more hour."

Then we had to start our own traditions with our own family. So I try to make my daughter and nieces and nephews time as fun as mine as a child, and carry on our family traditions.

-Reyna

From The Beat: It can be hard to decide which traditions to carry on, and which to create for yourself. We know that you'll be able to carry the love and happiness from your childhood into the experiences of the younger generation.

Songs Across Borders

Songs birth dances, or is it the other way around? I believe that songs/ beats vibrate in your body, creating a dance.

I remember La Macarena and the Biri Biri Bam Bam by Selena. I was crossing the Mexico and US border when Selena's songs were blasting on the radios.

Those songs were the only common/similar "thing" across all countries – Guatemala, Mexico, and US at that moment for me. I was seven years old.

Decades later, I hear those songs and I dance to them with childhood memories in my head. Let your body remember the beat. Feel the beat and dance with it.

-Gauri S.

From The Beat: Your descriptions and imagery make us feel like we're really with you on your journey. Songs have such a power to remind us of where we've been and where we're going. Thank you for sharing.

My Family Dinners

When I was five my grandparents inspired the family to get together and have fun and spend time with each other by having Sunday dinners. Every year we did something new, such as play board games and a classic pin the tail to the donkey. It was then passed on to my uncles and we decided to switch it up a little bit by playing games on our mobile devices and this game site called Jackbox. It's a website with fun and cool games that are approved for all to play.

Don't let your dreams be dreams, make them a reality!

-Tairic

From The Beat: That sounds like a lot of fun! Value the time you have with your family, and keep these good times close to you.

The Dance

I like to dance. I watch videos that you can see and learn how to dance. I have fun dancing and watching people. Learning how to dance makes me want to dance. I like to dance at home and outside my house. There's an app called Tiktok, you can dance on it and you can learn how to dance. People dance on there and you can learn.

I dance at school with my friends. My lil brother watches me dance and he can dance too. He watches me and it makes him want to dance, too. It makes me feel cool and I can dance like people.

At Father's and Families I see people dance. I watch them, they dance good and that's how I learn, to watch people dance.

I dance with my mom and sister. We dance at parties and at home. I dance with my auntie. The last time I danced was at a quinceñera and at my auntie's party.

-Annalyse

From The Beat: We can tell that you and your community love to have fun and celebrate with each other. Joy is such an important part of life. We're glad that you experience joy in people and in dancing.

FATHERS & FAMILIES OF SAN JOAQUIN, STOCKTON, CA

Letter to my Dad

Dear Dad,

To start it off I want you to know that I will always be there for you on our worse days and our happiest days. I'm also sorry for all the troubles I have caused throughout my eighteen years of living. I'm also sorry I didn't become the son of your dreams, but as long as I'm living this earth I'm going to try to give you the most I can from my ability.

I am also blessed that you have always been there in my life and not giving up on me and being my number one fan. Another blessing that I'm thankful is that you gave out family is food, clothes, and a roof over my head. It's good that I didn't get everything in this world, but what we did have I tried to keep me and my sisters as happy as possible.

Hopefully we can get through the struggle that we are going through as in right now, but I will not give up on you because I understand I will feel heartbroken as well.

-Burrito

From The Beat: We can tell how important your dad is to you - have you shared with him how much he means to you? We're sure he'd love to hear it. Continue to build your relationship with him!

Loving Yourself

Learn to love yourself, believe in yourself, and respect yourself. Each of us has our own story and that makes us unique. Learn and grow from it. Work every day on yourself, don't forget to smile.

I learned to love myself the hard way. In high school I wanted to fit in with my friends and be someone who I wasn't. I suffered from culture identity and my parents saved me. I was taken out of high school the beginning of my junior year and into independent study. My parents saw that I was going down the wrong path and forgetting where my roots came from.

During independent study I learned to be alone, have confidence, and believe in myself. My family supported me and continues to guide me. I never thought I would go to college. I just graduated from San Joaquin Delta College last month! I'm transferring to the University of Pacific and I will be starting this August in the fall. I do have my bad days, but I don't give up.

-Crystal

From The Beat: You've been through a lot at a young age, and have gained a lot of wisdom that you can teach from. We're really proud of you for pursuing your education and believing in yourself! Keep it up!

Saving One Person

I would want to save my Ma, because she took care of me throughout my life for thirteen years of living. If my Ma was in the fire and I had to choose between my Pa, and brother, I would choose my mother. I would choose her because she a hustler and keeps me in check making sure I do the right things. Also, she feeds me and clothes me. I really appreciate my mama because she brought me into this wonderful world.

-Tord

From The Beat: Your mother is very special to you. How can people show their family they appreciate them?

Quote to Live by

"Success is not final, failure is not final, it is courage to continue that counts" -Winston Churchill

I agree with this quote. To me this quote means that even when you succeed something what else is there that you can accomplish? Are you going to settle for just that? Failure is not always a bad thing, you can learn from your mistakes. Like the quote says, "it is courage that counts."

-Star

From The Beat: We agree failure isn't always a bad thing because it allows you to learn from your mistakes. What is a mistake you have learned from?

Cabollo Dorado

Yes, I do like to dance. The last time I danced was today. The occasion was at Father's and Families. The name of the song is Cabollo Dorado. It is a Mexican song and it's in Spanish. Yes, it is unique to our culture because every Latino culture knows how to dance to it, or just knows or has listened to this song. It is a Mexican dance.

Yes, I learned this dance when I was younger. My mom and my dad both taught me this dance because it is a part of my Latino culture. Yes, I enjoy this dance. I enjoy this dance because I am representing me and my family's culture. Somewhere that you can listen to this song is at a quinceñera.

-D'Angeleigh

From The Beat: Our culture is such a big part of who we are, and we love that you celebrate that! Thanks for sharing this song with us, we look forward to listening to it again!

Don't Trust Fake People

Don't trust fake people.

Fake people act all nice and friendly to me, but then they talk shhh behind my back.

I have eyes and ears everywhere.

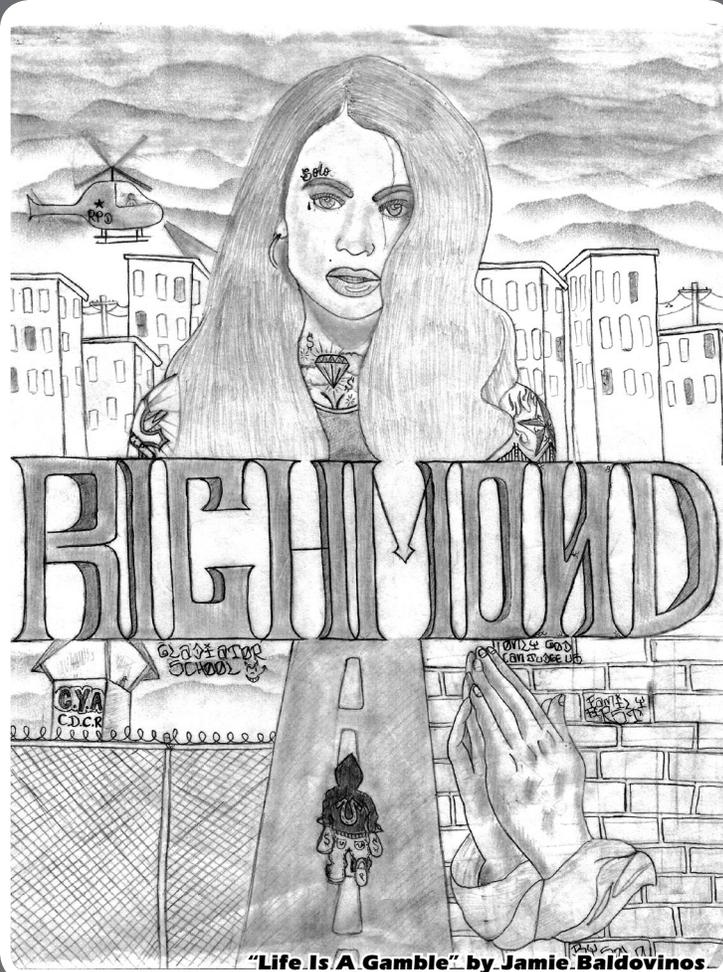
They lie over little things, and fake smile and fake laugh.

After about a day or two I can tell

if someone's real and if they won't betray me.

-Daniela

From The Beat: Fake people are not worth spending your energy on. Focus on the real ones, and continue to build relationships with people you can trust.



"Life Is A Gamble" by Jamie Baldovinos

FATHERS & FAMILIES OF SAN JOAQUIN, STOCKTON, CA



"Rising Phoenix" by Keith Erickson

The Day I Fought My Cousin

If I had a do-over I would have changed the day I fought my cousin. My cousin was killed October 2nd, 2018.

About a week before, me and my cousin had a fist fight and after that, I had not talked to my cousin.

Then I was woken up out of my sleep, hearing my cousin was shot and died.

If I had the chance to say something to my cousin, I would have told him "I'm sorry" and "I love you, cousin."

-DeAndre

From The Beat: We're very sorry for the loss of your cousin, and that it happened during a time when you two weren't on good terms. Know that your cousin forgives you, and that he knew you loved him. Keep his spirit with you as you move forward, honoring his life. We also appreciate the conversation we had with you.

Donuts

So like, this one time I was in an accident because I encouraged my brother to drive drunk. We were all getting drunk and my uncle passed out, and my brother wanted to go home but didn't want to drive drunk, so I told him if he drives there, I'll drive back and he finally agreed because his girl kept blowing him up.

We got to his house safely but he ended up wanting to drive more, so we took off and he started doing donuts. He lost control of the car and we crashed. I didn't get in trouble 'cause I took off, but he got a DUI.

-Ie

From The Beat: Drinking and driving is no joke. We're relieved to know that everyone ended up okay, but please make the right decision for yourself and everyone involved to stay sober if you're getting behind the wheel. The consequences aren't worth it!

Oldies

I love to dance because my mom makes me dance with her. I like oldies songs with my mom. She makes me happy when she plays them and we dance. These songs make me dance.

-Gerardo

From The Beat: What a sweet time to spend with your mom. Thank you for sharing!

Born to Be a King

I was born to be a king but life had different plans
 You can't convince me I'm not, I know that I am
 So many doubt I could do it, I'm not easily influenced
 Me and my homies only drop the truest music
 You can't fix a broken glass, so you leave with the pieces
 But you keep it deep inside, like it's your dirty lil' secrets
 It gets cold when you're alone, before you know it your heart freezes
 And the pain that never ceases, from days to counting seasons
 To that lil' ghetto boy who needs some understanding
 'Cause he wonders what he did so bad to be abandoned
 And were to call home
 and all he really knows it's how it feels to be a burden
 I started thinking about the stuff that got me to this point
 Ain't got a letter in forever but just hustled up a joint
 I take it to the neck and go to the beginning
 When I first caught my case and all the lessons it would give me
 If it ain't love problems it's drug problems
 Fighting ten with an "L" like I ain't got enough problems
 Inhaling pain, exhaling sorrow
 They say time is money, well my time is borrowed!

-CJ

From The Beat: This is such beautiful writing. The broken glass gives you perspective, and a deep wisdom. Life may have taken you on a different course than you imagined, but you're still the king that you were born to be. Embrace your history.

A Place I Did Not Want to Be

The "do over" I would really want would be to do over the last night I got arrested. That night caused me to become my boyfriend's co-defendant. I by law cannot come in contact with him. This night also became the night I got caught because I had been on the run and even with me faking my name, they still found out who I really was. This night took me to a place I did not want to be.

My boyfriend and his friend committed a crime that night and I took BART in. The police had guns pointed at us, telling us to get on the ground. My boyfriend resisted and got slammed to the ground and had a gun put to his head, "Any moves and I'll shoot." I remember the dog we had with us barking, wanting to attack while we were lined up on the sidewalk. It not being my first time being arrested, my heart was pounding, watching someone I love in that position.

-Yours

From The Beat: This is a very frightening situation, and we're sorry that it escalated the way it did. What do you need now to heal from that night, and move forward in a positive and productive way?

The Way I Let People Get Close

If I had an opportunity to do something over, I would probably go back and change the way I let people get close to me. I say that because people I used to associate with on a deeper level always tended to betray me. Seem like I always showed love and lots of it, that I never got back, even with some of the people I had genuine love for.

Over time, the pain turned to anger and all the built up stuff had to come out. Only thing now is that nothing really matters no more because everything that used to matter a lot to me always seemed to leave my life in ways that made me feel like they had been snaking me the whole time.

-Lz

From The Beat: It's so hard to let go of the people and the mindsets that no longer serve us. Don't close yourself off to people who want to care for you because of the people who've hurt you. You deserve love.

FATHERS & FAMILIES OF SAN JOAQUIN, STOCKTON, CA

My Future

This past year I learned how to be loyal in a good way and not in a bad way. I got all F's in school, and my mom was stressing about it, so next quarter I wanted to make my mom proud and get all A's, so I did.

I want to graduate high school and succeed in life. After I graduate, I wanna get into baseball. When I got all A's my mom was proud and it made me feel good, so it motivated me to keep doing good.

-Nicolas

From The Beat: You put your mind to what you wanted to accomplish, and you did it! Tell us more about what's next for you!

No Man is Invincible

The worst advice I have taken has been from my dad. As a child he has always told me, never fear a man and never let anyone take anything from you.

One time he was around the corner from our house at the liquor store and some guy tried to rob him. He pointed a gun to my dad and demanded his wallet. All my dad said was, "Son, you are going to have to take my life then, because where I'm from, we rob people, we don't get robbed."

So the young man that pointed the gun to my dad hit my dad and took off running. He didn't take anything from my dad. When I heard this story I felt amazed to have such a fearless dad. He was my super hero. I felt someone who isn't afraid to die, every man would fear.

Until the time I was seventeen years old, I had never been robbed 'til one day some guy pulled a gun on me and wanted to rob me. I looked down the barrel of that gun and laughed at him and went after the gun. We tossed around for a bit and I ended up getting shot. The bullet grazed my head and hit me in my shoulder, two inches away from my heart, one inch away from my lung. I learned that no man is invincible.

-Gordo

From The Beat: We're so glad that you're alright! It's true that no man is invincible, and we have to be careful about the battles we choose. After this experience, what advice would you give to a younger version of yourself?

Cherish Your Loved Ones

"If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude."

I tried to change something I didn't like, so I changed my attitude. I tried to get my mom to stop drinking and driving, but she hasn't. I changed my attitude by loving her more, because anything can happen at any moment, and I learned to not be so mad. So I don't get mad anymore, I just look and love her.

-Unique

From The Beat: It's hard to watch the people we love making dangerous decisions. We deeply admire the compassion you have for your mom. Keep supporting her to stop that habit.

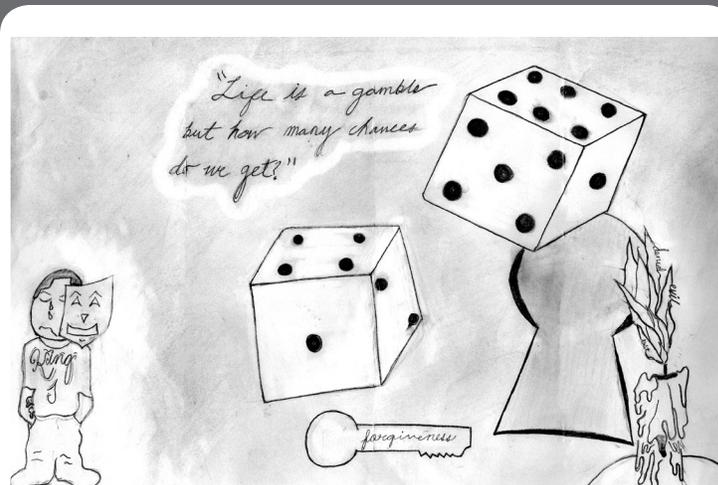
Joy-Ride

In September of 2018 I decided to take my mother's car for a joy ride and I crashed it into three cars and ran because I thought I was going to get arrested.

If I could back up to that day, I would because I was still on probation and since I did that hit and run, I violated my probation. So if I could go do it over, I would.

-Peter

From The Beat: We're happy to hear that you're okay, and hope that you don't put your probation in jeopardy again!



"Chances" by King J

Growing Up in the Negative Environment

I've been out for a cool minute, about six months. I was locked up the first time when I was a very young teen. I was fighting in school - this got me locked up.

I always thought I knew everything. I didn't take anyone's advice.

The first time in the hall I spent a week.

Second time was truancy for not going to school. I was locked up for two weeks. The third time was a home-invasion. I was caught in the act, in the house, hella guns pointed at me by the police. I was arrested and sent to the hall, I served almost five months and was released on house arrest for a week, and now I'm serving three years of probation.

Probation is all right, though probation trips when you don't go to school and threatens to lock you up.

You know I can't walk down the street without being harassed by the police? The police look at me like I'm someone bad.

Right now I need to be free for my baby nephew. I need to think before I react. I used to not think and just act, act, act.

You know I've been kicked out of five schools? Four elementary and now one high school. This is not how I want to be known as.

I regret my choices - my anger that gets the upper hand on me, but I am trying to keep cool. It's hard, especially knowing my cousin was mistakenly killed by another hood. These flashbacks bring back anger. Right now, I'm doing my best to control my actions, you know, trying to be cool.

People who could relate to this, really read this, because it is not what a young kid wants. I'm sixteen years old - I want to work and take care of my family. That's a real man. I don't want to only be known as a troublemaker. Sadly, that's how the system sees me and they throw it in my face. Wrong! I'm working to change my ways, so I have a future.

-Zayy

From The Beat: We're so sorry about the loss of your cousin. We see you working hard and doing the best you can, and support you in your desire to take care of your family. The system is wrong about you. Keep working towards the future you want for yourself and your loved ones.

Reach Out to Us!



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RESILIENCE ORANGE COUNTY, SANTA ANA, CA

Resilience Orange County

Resilience Orange County (ROC) addresses the crimmigration (the intersection of the criminal and immigration) system, and the impact its had on our communities. Formed from the merging of two like-minded organizations, ROC has had major success in changing local policy around crimmigration, preventing deportations, and pushing the Santa Ana Unified School District to adopt restorative justice practices.

In 2017, ROC was able to advocate with local partners to create the strongest "Sanctuary City" policy in the country, to successfully remove I.C.E. out of the Santa Ana County Jail, and to create a city fund that provides legal representations to Santa Ana residents in immigrations proceedings.

ROC envisions resilient youth, thriving communities of color, and a transformative movement.



Reach Out

In times of hardship, frustration, and despair, it may seem like the only solution to obstacles is giving up.

It's unfortunate that we feel isolated in a world with billions of people.

How can we feel lonely? Why does no one understand? Why am I afraid? These are all questions that arise as our minds, souls, and bodies are overwhelmed with sorrow.

We do our best to calm ourselves by saying, "It's ok." We repeat it once, twice, three times, a bunch of times until our conscious no longer feels lost. But don't worry; it's ok to not feel ok! Repeat it, "I am not ok!"

Acknowledging that one is not ok is the first step to healing and personal transformation. Don't be afraid to ask for help! Put your pride aside and remove the chains that are weighing you down. There are many people out there who may be experiencing the same or a similar situation. You will discover that when we undergo hardships, frustrations, and despair, with someone or many other people, they are powerful bonds that are generated through the love of unity. Remember, Don't be afraid to reach out!

-Jesus

From The Beat: Such dark irony that in a world so populated—at least for the most part—that many feel so lonely as if they are the only ones in their own lives. You're right; we shouldn't put ourselves down for feeling down. That love of unity you speak of is an important one.

Cutting Out the Toxic

A time I bravely let go of something was when I realized that there was a toxic person in my life who was holding me back in school because of the type of relationship I had with this person. It was extremely difficult for me to let go knowing I would constantly see them in a class and around school.

Regardless of the attachment, I left the person and explained why. I ignored everything after that. After about a month I stopped being bothered by their presence. I realized I had made the right choice because I was making choices for just myself and nobody else.

-Angelica

From The Beat: Wow! That is really impressive. Most people have a hard time cutting out the toxic friendships in their lives. Remember that it was hard but it served you well.

Fifteen Years

My birthday is tomorrow and I am finally going to turn fifteen. I have learned so much these past years. I have learned to appreciate everything in my life, no matter the importance. I have learned to be grateful for the blessings in my life like my parents, siblings, and every person that has ever guided me through life.

One important thing that that I've learned is to love and take care of myself. I used to really put myself down because I was ashamed of my physical appearance and I thought of myself as a burden to other people. I have earned from my past experiences and embraced who I am.

Fifteen years of so many struggles that I have been resilient enough to overcome those struggles. Fifteen years of tears. Fifteen years of happiness. Fifteen years of so many emotions. These fifteen years of life have taught me so many lessons. I'm so grateful for everything.

-Oscar

From The Beat: Happy Birthday! You are very wise for your age. What would you like to accomplish this upcoming year?

From Maya

The quote from Maya Angelou says, "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude." I like breaking this quote apart and thinking of the meanings behind them.

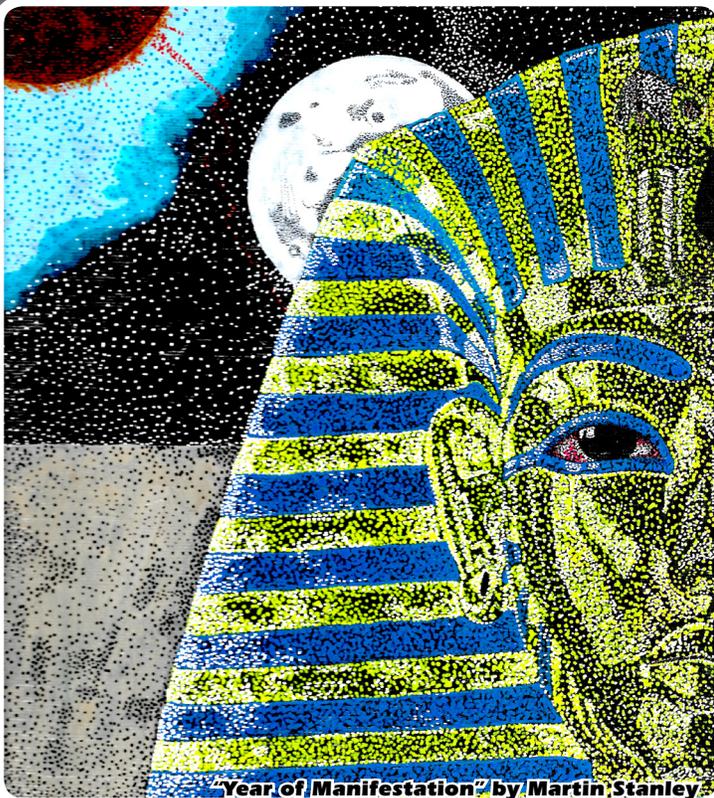
The first part of the quote is saying don't be afraid of the outcome to change something. As long as you know you're making a change to the world. Like, if you know that something is wrong, then go out and change it.

To me, the second part of the quote says if you can't do it the way you were doing it before, start brand new. Change it up. That is what this quote means to me.

As a youth, I can relate to this quote because being in Santa Ana, at Resilience Orange County, has really opened my eyes to many new things. As this quote implies, many changes are yet to come.

-Anthony

From The Beat: We all want changes in life, for the most part, but whether we're trying too hard or not trying enough, change may not always come. If the changes don't happen, we shouldn't get ourselves down further in life. Stay motivated and always keep a positive outlook on life.



"Year of Manifestation" by Martin Stanley

RESILIENCE ORANGE COUNTY, SANTA ANA, CA

The Idea of Being an Agent of Change

I agree with the idea. A lot of people talk about wanting to change. For example, a lot of people talk about wanting change for racism, stereotypes, etc. But many people who say this do the same thing. They say they want changes but aren't really serious about it.

Or they just don't have the time to push for the change they want. Another thing people do is talk about change that should happen but decide to leave it to other people rather than doing it themselves.

-Angel

From The Beat: You're right, people talk a lot but not many people do a lot. Maybe its fear? Maybe it's not caring enough? It isn't fair to always rely on other people, so you're right, if we're going to talk change, we better make some changes.

Dear Friend

A time I had to say goodbye to a good friend was my friend Ramy's father. He was a very nice person and would always give me rides home when his son and I would get out of rehearsals. He would also always check up on me. He was a very nice person and always supported us by giving us a speech about being in school and if we needed help to ask for it. He would always tell me that if I needed help I could ask him.

One day I was scrolling through snapchat and I saw my friend Ramy's snap and it said RIP. I did not want to ask right away so I waited twenty minutes. I asked Ramy if he didn't mind me asking who passed away. He responded that it was his dad.

At that moment I was in shock, my heart was pounding, and I burst into tears. I told him his Dad was a great man and that he loved him. I told him I appreciated everything he has done for me and that I sent my condolences to him and his family. It was hard to say goodbye because he always said yes and yes to giving me a ride home. That is why I loved Ramy's dad.

-Anthony

From The Beat: The memory of his dad will live not only through Ramy but through you as well. We are sure you will always remember his kindness and pass it on to someone else.

That Advice

"Be yourself," everyone said, my mom, my teachers, and my T.V.—everyone I knew—but "myself" isn't liked by my "friends," neighbors, or teachers.

I thought being myself would be fun or fulfilling and I thought my friends would like me for me and not for who I wasn't but for who I was—I was told to be quiet or to stop being myself by my friends or family.

I learned, but deep down I always knew, that being myself, where and when I was, isn't a good idea.

-Matthew

From The Beat: We're sorry to hear that. We're often told you can't please everyone. But if you can't even please yourself, what are you left with? If it's hard to find people to like you for who you are and to be the way you want to be, please do it for yourself at least.

A Letter...

Dear You,

You are here in this moment. You made it. You overcame the stereotypes. Say it...

"I graduated high school, I'm a first gen. School won't be easy, work won't be easy, but remember that you are here, present and loved. Let it go. Leave all those traumatic memories behind. It's time to let go."

Everything will be fine,

-A

From The Beat: We love this. Simple words put together with ease. This mantra is kind of de-stressing. It's like a little prayer of thanks to yourself and we'd encourage you to say it as often as you can—weekly, or even monthly—just to remind yourself you've done good.



"Untitled" by Donald Hooker

You Got This!

Hey, you! Yes, you! I am speaking to all of you who are currently going through a big challenge in life. Whether it's an educational, personal, work-related, or family struggle, I just want you to know that I see you and I feel you! You got this! YOU GOT THIS!!!

I am here for you and I will encourage you to persevere through all these obstacles that are currently gluing you down! I've been in your shoes. Trust, there were times when I no longer wanted to continue with my vision in accomplishing my goals!

It sucks that you feel like this because you are a beautiful soul that shouldn't feel this ugly thing we call pain! One of my favorite rappers once said, "There's beauty in the struggle, ugliness, in the success!"

Embrace that struggle that is currently stopping you from obtaining the joy you desire in life. To me, undergoing all this pain and suffering makes the accomplishments all more worthwhile. YOU GOT THIS!!!

-Jesus

From The Beat: Pain is an ugly thing and we all experience it one way or another. But without pain we wouldn't be able to grow and help others who may experience it in different ways. We encourage you to continue encouraging others. Thank you for your positive thoughts!

Growing Something Important

I hope my tree will blossom into something I'm proud of.

I have planted many seeds that I don't regret so far.

With my school diploma I try to maintain good grades.

I have a good relationship with my family and friends.

I really hope that those relationships will continue to flourish.

Though if any of these branches are hurting my growing tree, it is my duty to cut them so they can't hurt.

The other option would be to heal these intoxicating branches so that my tree can grow with it still attached.

I will continue to water and care for my tree

and I hope to plant more seeds in the future

so by the end of my life there is a garden

that I can be proud of.

-Jose

From The Beat: Beautiful! It can be hard for some people to work toward their goals and not get distracted. Sounds like you're putting in the work. Great job, all the best to you!

RESILIENCE ORANGE COUNTY, SANTA ANA, CA

Thoughts on The Quote of the Week

Maya Angelou says, "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude."

I agree with this quote because change is a difficult thing. Even when you have all the reasons or motivation, it's difficult but a bit easier. If you want to change badly, you are willing to do everything because you're not happy with what you want and are willing to change no matter how difficult.

Something I have tried to change about myself is the way I talk and respond to people. Sometimes I can respond to people in a bad way and hurt their feelings. I tried to change this because I was tired of hurting people and talking bad to people. The motivation I had made me want to change, no matter how difficult.

-Angel

From The Beat: We applaud you! That's very admirable. Not many people are willing to change aspects of themselves due to their pride. Not many people even realize the way they behave may even be hurtful. But you know, maybe it's not always you. Maybe others need to change how they're own behavioral reactions?

Change Is Human Nature

No matter who it is, everyone is always seeing change. It's human nature. People always desire, and they are never satisfied, yet they are too lazy to bring around that change.

It just takes a lot of work, work that most people are not willing to put in. They are also scared of change. Scared that things won't end up better. But no one knows until they try it out.

What can motivate people to commit to change? It seems like there is no real answer to that. Maybe if something threatens their way of living, like deportation.

-Jose

From The Beat: You make a really good point. Many people change when faced with a very difficult situation, but not all do. Is there anything you would want to change within yourself?

That Label: Santa Ana

People think Santa Ana is ghetto.

But it's better than Irvine!

The label we give it is...

the strength that makes Santa Ana a gem.

Santa Ana's eloteros are our business people, our hustlers.

Our moms pushing their strollers

waiting for the bus

are our safety,

our guardian angels.

Our youth outside

in the park,

chilling,

are our educators and warriors.

Santa Ana isn't ghetto and it should never be Irvine.

Santa Ana is power, it's beauty, it's home.

-C

From The Beat: Certainly sounds like a gem! Lovely depiction of the hardworking folk of Santa Ana! Beautiful imagery. Your words capture the power and beauty of this place.

My Message

I know I haven't gone through many of these hardships and I am grateful for that. I have gone through some types of hardships, but I've gotten through it. My message is to persevere and strive in your life. Although there may be some obstacles in your life, don't let it stop you from achieving something in your life.

Don't let anyone ruin your hopes and dreams. You are an amazing and wonderful human being and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. I've read this quote on the Internet and it goes like this, "Don't let the world change your smile, let your smile change the world."

It hit me really hard because I believe in the power of people and that we have the power to change our community if we all come together. Back on track, even when you are at your worst or when you feel horrible, just remember that you are valuable and loved.

When you feel lonely, know that there is someone that loves you and wants to be with you. Just remember to keep on pushing and striving, regardless of all the hardships. Keep your head up and think about the positives in life

with care.

-Oscar

From The Beat: We love this message and we do hope people out there are able to keep their heads up and be as positive as possible despite what obstacles get thrown their way. Keep spreading your message!

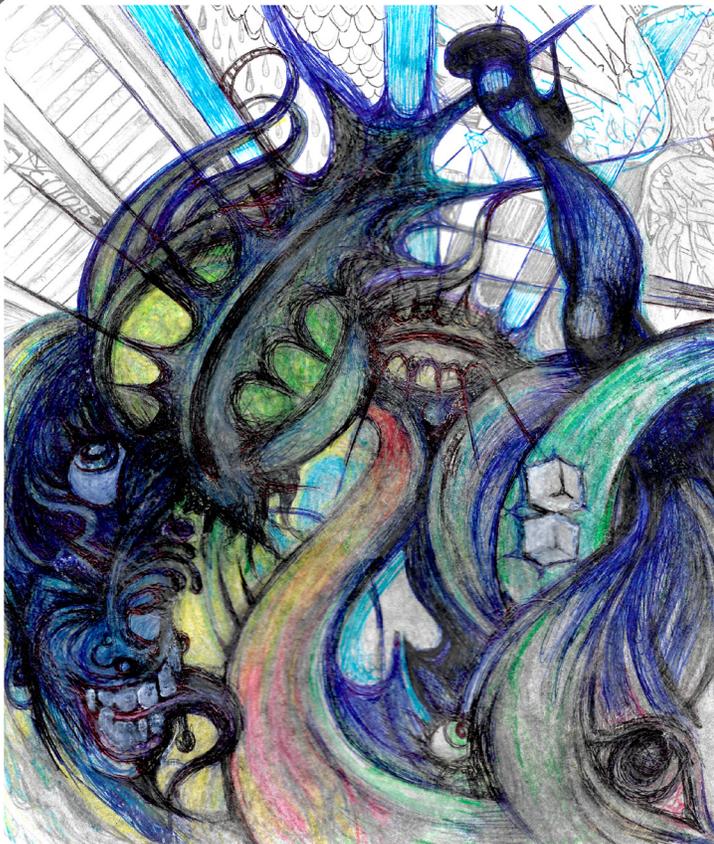
Do Over

I want to do over my sophomore year of high school. I was a child that was embarrassed about myself. I was embarrassed about my family. I was embarrassed about my parents as they are undocumented. I was embarrassed of my thick accent. I'm a first generation student. My school was white and I was a short, brown girl. I remember ignoring my parents' calls to avoid speaking in Spanish. I would avoid my back to school presentations. I would ignore my dad's deportations. I would ignore my whimpering siblings. I would ignore all the pain and sadness I carried.

I would do over and give my parents the love they gave me. I would love them for their beautiful language. For their hard work and effort to keep a roof over my head. I would love my dad and call him as he was in Tijuana. I would love my mom in her moments of loneliness. I would love my siblings. I would love myself.

-Dulce

From The Beat: Don't shame yourself for being embarrassed. It may have hindered you then but it's not your fault. We'd all love to change the past, and maybe if the world were different you wouldn't have had those feelings at all in high school. It is important what we are doing in the now, and you are doing great things. Keep at it.



"Year of Manifestation" by Martin Stanley

RESILIENCE ORANGE COUNTY, SANTA ANA, CA

Being an Agent Of Change at ROC

I think being an agent of change can be hard at times because a lot of people see a lot of things that could be better but won't do anything to change things. Our generation has been known to really just post about rather than keep up with it. It's rare to find youth who will speak up and take action.

I feel very blessed that I was introduced to such an amazing group of people who introduced me to organizing and taking action. Sometimes you don't need the money to feel privileged. I feel privileged, as a youth that organizes, and will one day be a future leader in a small city.

I have these resources that not many have, and I couldn't be more thankful. We will be the change. We have a voice. For the ones that are coming before us, right now we are their voice.

-Leslie

From The Beat: We all have a voice! But some voices are louder than others, and that's not always a good thing. Change is hard and our generation is known for more bark than their bite, but you can help turn things around for the generations to come!

Turning on the TV

When I turned on the TV I saw cartoons, I saw lots of cartoons. I think cartoons play an important role in the development of children's minds, but I think we need cartoons that are real and more representative of our society.

We need cartoons that teach kids to see and treat each other as equals. Cartoons that show how to treat people with respect. Cartoons that teach morality.

-Matthew

From The Beat: You make a great point! The media does not represent the real world. If you were to write a cartoon, what would it be about?

Dear New Me,

Hopefully, you're doing well. I know you have gone through a lot and you have been resilient thus far.

Hopefully, you are not as insecure as you were in your teens. Don't think about what other people think of you. Those people are toxic and you don't need them. Don't let your insecurities overtake your mind and life. Don't be afraid to express yourself and live your life. Have some fun here and there. Don't be afraid to take risks. Don't overthink everything like you did when you were younger. That was tough and hopefully that changed you.

Some advice is to remain resilient and proud of whom you are. Do not forget about where you came from because that is who you are. Where you came from is the reason you are who you are. The people shaped you into a strong and open-minded person.

Your parents are the most important people in your life. They provided for you when they couldn't provide from themselves. I know it was hella hard with fights and arguments nearly every night.

Remember, you are a hero to your little sister. She looks up to you so don't let her down. You shaped her into a smart and beautiful young woman.

Do not forget about your brother who pushed you hella hard so that you could succeed. He's the reason why you're so passionate for school. He made you stronger.

Don't forget about the pain and suffering that you went through. Although that shhh hurt, you faced it and lived through it. Don't be afraid to let go of things in your life.

Lastly, don't forget who you are because even though you feel like giving up, you are the only person that is going to be there for you. Don't forget to take care of yourself, mentally and physically.

With care, old you.

-Oscar

From The Beat: Mental and physical care is so important. Along with not forgetting where you came from, who you are, how your parents helped shaped you, how your siblings helped round you out, don't forget to take care of yourself mentally and physically. You've expressed yourself greatly here; don't ever shy away from doing that more in life. We're inspired!

Dear Alba

You have changed and cultivated so much. You have been able to process so many traumas and you have been able to look at certain people in the face and know that they no longer do damage to you.

I had a conversation with you the other day and I had forgot how innocent and beautiful you were. But now I carry you around everywhere and I put beautiful things in my jar and feed it to you when you aren't feeling safe.

When you were younger, I carried that feeling around a lot but now I know how to identify when I am safe and when I'm not. So I want to remind you that all the things you've picked up I am putting down. I am dealing and understanding. So thank you for surviving, thank you for being my vessel. I can now let us both out where it is safe and loving.

-Alba

From The Beat: This is so lovely. Your words are so kind and comforting. We love the slightest bit of vulnerability in acknowledging when you do or do not feel safe and that you have your own way of handling that feeling. Surviving is such a simple concept for our world but not as easy for everyone. And that is not an ideal world. We, too, thank you, and will be surviving right along with you.

Friendships

"If You're Brave Enough to Say Goodbye, Life will Reward You With a New Hello" - Paulo Coelho

As I think of this quote, I begin to remember the great friendships that were built throughout my high school career. Friendships that were shaped by years of experience, adventures, and thrilling stories that uniquely bond relationships.

My dear friends, I know I haven't reached out to see how you are doing. Not even a simple "hello". My dear friends, I hope you are doing great! I hope you are enjoying life and living life like there is no tomorrow. My dear friends know that I am grateful for all the time you dedicated in sharing these beautiful memories that I promise to never forget.

-Jesus

From The Beat: Is everyone very far away, or by choice you have chosen to keep your distance? From what we know in this piece, we are sure they would like to hear that you are thinking of them. What do you think?

Why?

Why is it that I have to live with constant fear?

Why am I expected to be someone I am not?

Why is the world so judgmental and strict?

Why can't I be myself sometimes?

Why are people so cruel to each other?

Why is there so much pain in the world?

Why are there systems that limit people from achieving greatness?

Why is there such inequality in our world?

Why do my parents have to live in constant fear of being deported?

Why do I have many questions that can't be answered?

-Oscar

From The Beat: These are all great questions. Asking why is instinctual when faced with trials, adversity, and confusion. You might not come across the answers anytime soon, but there is something in just asking the questions.

Reach Out to Us!

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YOUNG WOMEN'S FREEDOM CENTER, SF, CA

Young Women's Freedom Center



Our mission is to empower and inspire young women (cis, trans, and non-binary) who have been involved with the juvenile justice system and/or the underground street economy to create positive change in their lives and communities.

In 2017, over 200 incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and system-involved women and girls formed the Bill of Rights for System-Involved Women and Girls. We organize around implementing policies to de-criminalize and de-carcerate our people.

With offices in San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose, YWFC has been serving young folks for over twenty-five years, and is at work expanding their programs across the country.

Changes

I would just tell myself to keep doing what I do best. Stay to myself, to the things that are going to help me in life like school and work. My old me would love the new me because I'm really not how I used to be. I just got back on track. Don't focus on the hate and the people who bring negativity to my life.

I love the person I am becoming and I'm going to continue to do it. For example, I got two jobs and I'm doing everything for probation, and I'm going to school. At one point I didn't do anything but steal and do bad things.

-Mystery Girl

From The Beat: Stay on your path to success, it sounds like you are going in the right direction.

A Letter to the New Me

Keep doing what you need to do and put your priorities first before anything. Don't let people drag you into things that could put you in a situation you don't want to be in.

-Doing Me

From The Beat: We agree! Put yourself first, and know what you want.

Change To Grow!

People say they will change
And some don't go through with the change
Actions speak louder than words
If you don't want to change
For the better
Then nothing
Will change
You have to want it.

-Leti

From The Beat: We totally agree with you, and would add that not only do you have to want it, you have to strive for it even during rough times. This process makes you into a stronger, more resilient person.

No Expectations

I feel like the system, teachers, PO, YGC (juvenile hall), didn't give me an option on whether I'd beat the statistics or just be another statistic. I feel like they had already decided for me.

-Jasleen

From The Beat: You're not another statistic. You are your own person and you have the power to build the future you want for yourself!

More As A Win

I highly respect the quote, "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude" because not saying that you have to sit there and abide by something you don't accept, but it's saying if you're in history class falling asleep, then it must be you're tired or not interested. If you can change the way you perceive the class, then you might find or receive something that interests you.

So, if you're tired, try to wake up, drink water, or walk around to spark your energy. And if you're uninterested, then you can shift your energy into, "ok, what's at least one interesting thing?!" If you can change your attitude about a situation, you might perceive a situation more as a win and not a loss!

-Jocelyn

From The Beat: We love the positive and motivating message you have to be proactive. Taking initiative to change our attitudes is not easy. You have a good head on your shoulders. Keep striving by turning losses into wins!

That Label

Ugly, fat, gay, butch, dike, stupid
It mostly came from my childhood and
Family members living in deception, denial, guilt, and dysfunction
It made me feel dirty, worthless, and unlovable

I created unhealthy habits
Such as eating disorders, self-harm, and
People-pleasing
I also used to being "the class clown"
The loud mouth-girl
To mask my
Pain and my identity that I once believed

I sought out help and started utilizing
Tools such as truth statements, and words
Of encouragements
And hanging out with healthy people.

-Dericka

From The Beat: You've come such a long way, and have cultivated some invaluable resources to help you be your best self. Only you can define who you are. Thank you for sharing your journey with us. We're honored to be a part of it.



"No Evil" by Pricilla

YOUNG WOMEN'S FREEDOM CENTER, SF, CA

My Message

My message to you females, especially being a young black woman living in this society that we live in, it's easy to be stereotyped into believing that a person has to have this or have to look a certain way, but to be honest being yourself is easier and better.

Don't let nobody tell you how to live your life. Just smile and do what you love. Dress how you want, stay away from negative people and things, find what you love to do and be committed to yourself.

Love you. Love yourself or nobody will. Stay strong and keep yourself strong mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Fill your spirit with all the good things. We are blessings!

-Blessed

From The Beat: This is such a powerful message! We shouldn't let anyone or anything hold us back from being our true selves. Thank you for your inspiring words!

Resilient Woman

Dear Cero, hope all is well. Look old me, I love you. You made me almost dead but I lived and continue to stay strong. Love yourself, you will find your mother. You will just continue to push and not loose your soul. You came out threw a black hole to the light.

You are a resilient women. From locked up in 3 different jail systems, to being a community organizer. Nothing could break you, not even that man who tried to beat you to death. Hear you are speaking your testimony. You are strong and where you are now. How you made it where you are and how hard it is in your change as well. Triggers, people testing you, but you got this.

-Cero

From The Beat: Your strength and your work will inspire others everyday.

That Label

I got labeled by my exes as a dumb tit-for-tat girl, when really that wasn't the case. He tried making me feel guilty for stuff he done behind my back. It was hurtful to me because I had given my all and trusted deep down with personal stories and backgrounds and it didn't pay off.

So, I felt played and dumb because my goals and expectations was lost through that relationship. I just walked away from that person because it wasn't worth the pain, the stress, the drama. My actions probably affected this person to assume. I just got judged, talked about.

-Bre'Asia

From The Beat: What a frustrating relationship! We're glad that you're out of it, and know that no one can define who you are, except for yourself. How does this experience influence the relationships you'll have in the future?

Positive Attitude

I may not be able to change my current situation because I am on curfew/ankle monitor because of leaving program. Therefore, I need to change my attitude and be more optimistic because things will eventually fall into place. It will get easier and it will all work out for me.

Whenever things do not work out for me, I usually get mad and feel some type of way because it's not going my way. But as long as I stay positive and keep striving to become a better woman, then I will succeed. I need to be more positive and keep my head up at all times.

-Kimberly

From The Beat: A little bit of positivity goes a long way. We're really proud of you for taking a new perspective and continuing to strive. If you put out greatness, you'll receive greatness!

School and Me

Well I started at Head Start when I was a kid. I loved taking the naps and eating snacks. I went to Fairmont Elementary School. I had multiple friends, and we loved shooting hoops and playing kickball. I went to Visitation Valley Middle School. I was on the basketball team and we never lost a game. Even though there was one girl, she was a ball-hog.

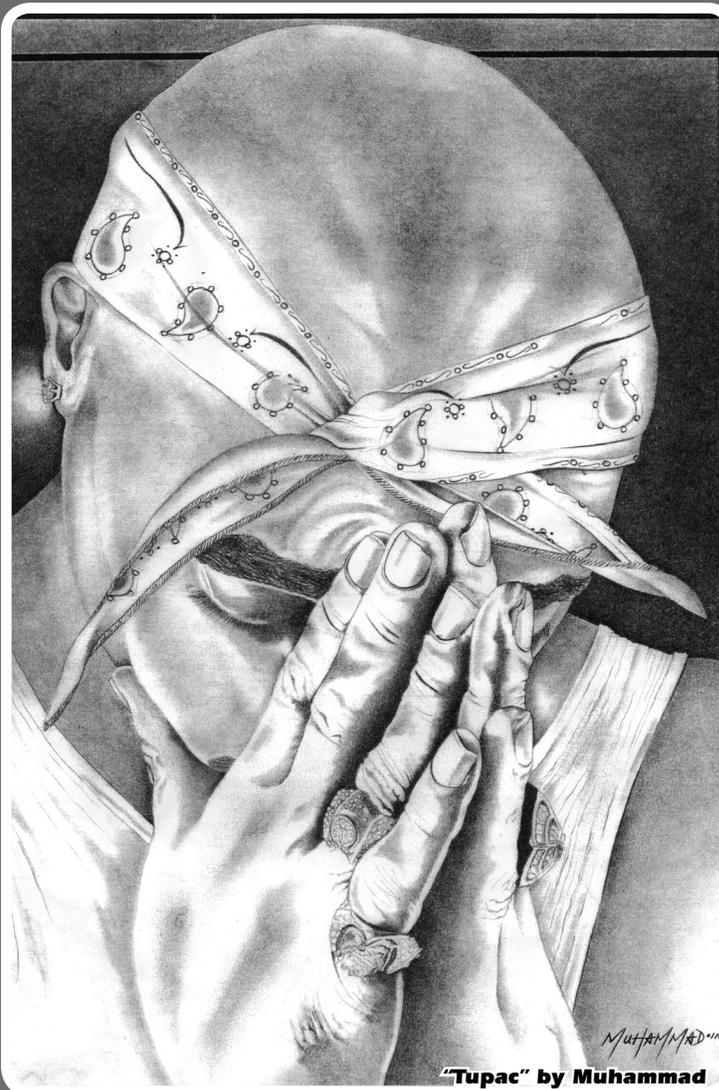
The security that worked there were cool people. The Principal, Mr. Durky, was very creative too. My favorite subject is math. I love counting money too. The subject I dislike the most is science. I've always had support, still do 'til this day. To be honest I literally had one day to get my things together to graduate middle school, but I did it.

I started at Burton High School, but I wanted to go to Galileo High School so badly that my mom transferred me. I loved it. I had joined ROTC and we had off campus lunch. Then my mom moved to Richmond so I went to Kennedy High School.

It was a big school. It was difficult because I didn't know anybody. I couldn't seem to get what I needed done, so I got transferred to Greenwood Academy. Then I finally ended up going to Five Keys. My educational goal is to get my HS diploma, I'm thinking about going to Duke University for basketball. My mother is my support. She makes me go harder.

-LaLa

From The Beat: Sounds like you changed schools a lot growing up. How were you able to adjust and make friends? Good thing you had your mom to push you and help you through!



"Tupac" by Muhammad

YOUNG WOMEN'S FREEDOM CENTER, SF, CA

Easier Said Than Done

I would agree on people saying they are going to change but don't do it. I think this is because it's easier said than done. I find myself to sometimes be like this and right before the time I got here.

One thing I know is that I can help others in a great way. One thing that can help the world is to make sure we remember to go with what's best for us.

-A Name

From The Beat: You said it! Remembering to go with what's best for us is definitely easier said than done, especially when temptation is around. What's best for you right now?

People selling me wishes and
enough real ones
I wish they could stop trying
to program me
And give me some
real solutions

R&T Note

In a year or two from now I hope your happy and stronger. Do it for you and Tito and nobody else. I hope everything you planning and dreaming for gets accomplished. I hope that once you move forward you don't look back.

Be happy, feel good about yourself and just know your not alone and that your not walking alone. With Tito and God are always walking with you. Don't let the people that hurt you back into your life you've been doing good so far so why toss it away over a person who don't give a shhh about you? Look at you, your good where you at. I hope you keep doing you. You and Tito will be fine. Don't trip and keep your head up.

-R

From The Beat: You give some great advice in this piece! Stick to your words and strive for what you deserve!

Disparity

Feeling despair makes you feel like life ain't fair

Sometimes it has to do with your actions

So, you need to subtract some things, or people, and do a fraction

You may be lacking, but as long as you always stacking

The good will always come with the bad

And sometimes it makes you feel sad.

-Kimberly

From The Beat: What makes you feel despair? What do you do to get through it? What are your goals going into the new year?

Keep Moving Forward

Don't be stuck up on the past because holding on to things holds you back. You have to keep moving forward. It's good to have your own time. You don't have to do everything together.

-Independent

From The Beat: Thank you for remind us how important it is to have a solid sense of self!

Where I Went to School, My School Life

Growing up in Valencia Gardens the School bus would pick us up in the front courts. If you lived in the VG's back in the days we would call it "the courts."

Bus would go up the hill on Potrero Hill and we would go under the seat and hang down. These were the things we would do to find happiness and forget about the things that were happening at home.

I went to Star King Elementary School. Everett Middle School was different. 6th grade back then we wouldn't have no uniforms. When I had worn a red sweater, I was targeted in my own school sending me home, all due to a color and barely in the 6th grade. Not a thang.

Fresh out of elementary school, I can say the best time was our yearbook. Three years I was picked for "pretty eyes." My art teacher was dope. This is where I learned my skills of art and tattooing. I learned a lot in middle school by my teacher's actions, other's, and mine.

International Studies Academy for freshman year was dope. I knew everybody. We would all come together. Best school year, volleyball, soccer, my history, and math teacher was dope. No lie, I would cut school, do my homework at Twenty-Fourth Street and Mission McDonald's, then I would finish my homework then I would run the streets.

My English Teacher spoke with me: "You have A's in your work but you are never here, how is that?" Sophomore year and the rest of school years I spent in Juvenile Hall.

-Young A

From The Beat: Sounds like you went to a bunch of different schools but had teachers that supported you at all of them. What did they teach you? Do you still use those lessons in your life now?

The Bait

Can't put no face to tomorrow

Can't trust no one

People selling me wishes and enough real ones

I wish they could stop trying to program me

And give me some real solutions

The wait, 300,000 per person, dang, I'm not even human

Just a box on a cement belt like inventory

Three years down 300,000 multiply by three that's 900,000

What would that look like if they invested in young folks?

I'm just waiting for my time to be done.

-KB

From The Beat: How do you wish you had been invested in? What do you wish had been done differently?

My Wait Is On My Time!!

The reason I wanted to write about question three is because it makes me think of everything I'm going through today.

I been waiting for a job, waiting for money to come in, and just waiting for everything to come together.

Another point is being incarcerated. I feel like that type of wait is different. When you are in jail, your only thing is when am I getting out? At that point it's just I want to be out with my loved one's and friends.

When you're out the wait is different because you are around a lot so it makes you forget about the wait. That's when you mess up. I've been waiting a long time for a lot of things but as soon as I forget something bad happens. I don't like to wait but I've been learning that everything takes time and I can't rush it. I just do what I'm supposed to do to make the wait shorter.

-Tenaya

From The Beat: That's a really interesting point. Do you think being in a situation where you have to wait is better for you then? Or what can you do when you are out to not forget and mess up?

YOUNG WOMEN'S FREEDOM CENTER, SF, CA

Be Open-Minded

I don't like it when people assume who you are and what you do. Assuming shows how much of an ass you are because you feel you're so secure with what you think about someone else, instead of getting to know each other or one another. You have to be willing to be open-minded and not assume anything. Assuming will only educate you so little. Labeling folks is not okay either. Let someone speak for themselves.

-Jocelyn

From The Beat: Yes! We should concern ourselves more with who we want to be, rather than who we want others to be. We appreciate this good advice!

People Assumed

I was labeled as "thief," "disrespectful." It just happened because people assumed I did those things because of how I dress or seem or "look." It made me feel like "wow" people really see me like that? I didn't do nothing because I didn't really care that much.

-Alexsa

From The Beat: Don't let other people's assumptions get you down! We hope you show us more of your true colors.

A Letter to Me!

Dear Jazzy,

Hey girl! Don't trip, you're holding up! I mean you went through incarceration and made mistakes in your life, but you're still here, still breathing and God blessed you with a voice and one day, you'll expand your horizons and go for your dreams.

Remember to keep your head up no matter what, do you. Worry about you, have faith in yourself, and let a person's actions show what is what instead of words that are fake. Be you and don't ever stop doing you just because a person isn't feeling you. Feel yourself, and feel yourself more. There's so much more to write but you already know what's up!

-Jazzy

From The Beat: We admire the amount of love you're giving yourself here, and we support you in being your true self. Keep standing up for who you are.

The Worst Things That Make You Stronger

If I had a do-over in life, I wouldn't use it because all the stuff I've been through or done made me who I am today. If I didn't go through the stuff I been through, I wouldn't know how to better myself or make my life better. It be the worst things that make you stronger.

-Chantel

From The Beat: We're proud of you for using your past to empower who you are today. It's not an easy thing to do. Your reflection gives you strength!

Start Something Fresh and New

"100% dissatisfaction brings about 100% change." - Hon. Elijah Muhammad

When you're fed up with what's not pleasing your soul or you feel it serves you and no one else, then it is time to put an end to it and start something new and fresh from what you already know. Not duplicate the same model, but to use what you know to implement.

Think of something that will help myself and others.

-Thinker

From The Beat: Yes! Learning about what does and doesn't serve your soul is an evolving process. Keep checking in with yourself about what's working for you!

Everybody is Not Your Friend

"if you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude."

-Maya Angelou.

I disagree with this quote because I tried doing those things to people that I cared about and I was close to but nothing worked, so I stopped trying.

My change is to stop letting other minds bring me down and to change the way I think. The lifestyle I want to lead is to be respectful, carry ourselves proper, and not judge others. I came a long way by changing what I do and who I hang out with. It took me to realize everybody is not your friend. It was hard, took me years to find out.

-Staying Positive

From The Beat: You've worked hard to get where you are, and look at you shine! We love how principled and dedicated you are to creating the environment you want to be in. Keep it up!

Actions Are Better

I agree that many people say that change are good but not many people put in action to make the change. Actions are better than words.

-Action Taker

From The Beat: Tell us more about what actions you're taking now.



"Epiphany" by Xavierre Allen

YOUNG WOMEN'S FREEDOM CENTER, SF, CA



"The Beat Within" by Keith Erickson

In My Thinking

In my thinking, I don't think I should advise somebody if I don't have anything good or positive to say, because I don't want to lead somebody to do something negative that won't be good for their future.

-Maria

From The Beat: We think this is a wise decision! What things do you think you could advise somebody on?

More Patience

Something I would do over would be the way I treat people and do things. I feel like I could do certain things more differently and better. The way I would do over is my attitude and the way I act toward things that get me mad and frustrated. I wish I had more patience with people and their stupid actions.

-Alexsa

From The Beat: The first step to creating change is to realize what you want to change. How can you practice patience on a daily basis?

With Age and Experience

Could you ever expect that the worst advice you could have ever taken was from your parents? Naturally you go to your parents for sound and reliable advice, but are they a credible source? Now with age and experience I have learned to take advice from those that are successful in the area that I am seeking advice.

For example, I now seek financial advice from those that are financially sound or their bank account is above the six figure mark. Another example would be me only taking advice on a successful marriage from a happily married couple. The crazy part is that I never saw the bad advice coming until I received the correct advice. Lesson learned.

-Najma

From The Beat: Sometimes our parents fall short of giving us good advice, or lead by negative example, but we can still gain wisdom from these situations. Continue to follow in the footsteps of the people you admire!

The Leader of Your Own Life

Live by your morals and beliefs!

Never let someone make you think or stray away from the real you!

Stand by your beliefs and do not fold for anyone!

Stand strong for what you believe in and never let up.

Make being you cool, and watch those slowly follow in your footsteps.

Be the leader of your own life.

-Najma

From The Beat: We love the positive message of this piece, to be our authentic selves and believe in who we are.

Unknown Letter

Life is hard and will get even harder when you are trying to be better

But everything will be fine as long as you grind harder

You are stronger because of all you went through

Just remember you can do all things as long as you follow through

God is by your side and won't ever leave you

Especially in jail when you feel you are all alone

So stay strong and stay true to yourself

-K

From The Beat: Your best advice and the secret to your success, is in your last line: stay strong and true to yourself.

Don't Trust Everything

You gone get yo' stuff together.

Don't trust everything bruh,

you can't always be available for everyone

who ain't gon' be available for you

when you need 'em.

Don't always tell yo' left what you doing with yo' right.

-Kapp

From The Beat: You're practicing good boundaries! Tell us more about the people who are available to you when you need them.

My First Love

Something I wish I could rewind is my relationship with my first love. To be honest, there's no one that can compete or come close to competing with her. She's 100% pure chocolate beauty. She has my back through whatever, whether I'm right or wrong. She's my best friend and my right hand. We can fight and the next second we're back friends.

-Danko

From The Beat: It's so important to have people like this in your life that you can rely on to be there for you, and provide you with unconditional positive regard. How does she challenge you to do your best?

Reach Out to Us!

**Young Women's
Freedom Center**
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YOUTH JUSTICE COALITION / FREE LA HIGH SCHOOL, INGLEWOOD, CA



Youth Justice Coalition

The Youth Justice Coalition (YJC) promotes safety in our schools, homes, and neighborhoods by using transformative justice and community intervention/peacebuilding, legal defense, and court monitoring. These tools give us an alternative to relying on law enforcement and help prevent system contact.

In the fall of 2007, the YJC founded Free L.A. High School to train youth in organizing, media, and public policy development. The school serves as one of the county's few community-based, owned and operated alternatives to detention and incarceration for youth.

YJC works to build a movement to challenge America's addiction to incarceration, as well as race, gender, and class discrimination through direct action organizing, advocacy, political education, and activist arts to disrupt power and foster change.

Thoughts on Juveniles

I feel like juveniles shouldn't be serving adult time. Some junkies serve their whole life and get no second chance. It's a "lesson learned" but how are they going to learn their lesson if you're treating them with no care and cruelty?

In my opinion, kids think differently. They have their own story behind everything. They need therapy. They need somebody to listen to them about how they feel, about themselves, and how they feel about others. They need help.

-Rachel

From The Beat: You're right; juveniles are still in the process of growing up, as we all are at any age. Do people truly learn their lesson through punishment alone? Some people miss out on whole life experiences to help shape and mold them to be the person they're meant to be or even the person they could be.

A Lion

A lion breathing fire
A gangsta you can't test
Puzzle pieces scattered everywhere.
My life was a mess.
Ninjas talking out they neck.
We gon' send a wreck team to put holes through that box,
Knock him down like swiss cheese.

-DaRon

From The Beat: Stay true to your words—regardless of what others think or say. Wreck and knock them down with your own strength and vigor. But a team also works.

It's A Bad Day...

"It's a bad day, not a bad life."
I like this quote because it tells me that no matter what happens in life, things will get better. Things can get better; everyone goes through bad times. But after that bad time things will get better.

-Breanna

From The Beat: I agree, although it is hard to filter through those bad days, we must always remind ourselves that they are just days that come and go. Let us cherish the good ones and strive for better ones.

Happiest Day of My Life

The happiest day of my life was when I had my baby. It was on September fourteenth, 2018.

The day before I had contractions, I was in so much pain. Around 5pm the next day, they told me I was going to have a C-Section. I was scared. I wanted to have her normally. I felt so much pressure and was having an anxiety attack, but when I heard my baby cry I felt better, excited even. She's the most beautiful baby and looks just like her dad.

-Jennifer

From The Beat: A truly marvelous moment! It is a true blessing. May you continue to have happier days in your life with your baby girl.

The Police and Being Mislabeled

The police would always stop me, thinking I was a gang member. They would always think I had something. In school, they would always say I was the main gang leader—that I would tell my friends what to do.

-Melissa

From The Beat: Sounds like you had a lot of weight put on your shoulders. Tell us how you changed that perception? We hope in time it will all be alleviated.

I Believe

I believe that I could graduate high school.
I also believe that I could be an A+ student!

-Julio

From The Beat: Don't ever stop believing. Always strive for greatness. You may not think it, but there are more people than you that believe in you.

Aguascalientes, Mexico

Aguas Calientes es una de los estados ubicados en la zona central del país de México. La que está conformado por once municipios. Cada municipio tiene una santa de voto.

Buena uno de estos municipios es muy reconocida por las carnitas o las gorditas. Este municipio se llama San Francisco de los Ramos. También San José de Gracia es muy reconocido por El Cristo Roto que tiene como centro de atención una presa de la cual te puedes meter en las lanchas.

Así como esos dos municipios son reconocidos los demás también.

-Esmeralda

Del Beat: Parece como un buen lugar que tú puedes visitar!

Hot Waters, Mexico

Hot Waters is in the Central part of Mexico, that is made up of eleven different counties. Each county has a majority vote.

Well from all these counties it is recognized for the meat and the pork skins. This county is called De Los Ramos. Also, San Jose de Gracia is well known by El Cristo Del Roto that with a speed boat you can get to know the area.

That's how the several counties are known.

-Esmeralda

From The Beat: Sounds like a wonderful place to visit. Definitely a place you should revisit when you get the chance and you will.

YOUTH JUSTICE COALITION / FREE LA HIGH SCHOOL, INGLEWOOD, CA

Gracias Por Todo

Gracias por superar las cosas que nunca imaginó que podría superar o lograr y por apoyar a tantas personas, incluso aquellas que solo querían que usted no fuera alguien en la vida.

Poco a poco, te diste cuenta de quién quería lo mejor para ti y quién quería que fueras miserable. Pensaste que solo porque te llamaban "AMIGOS" eran tus

amigos, pero no solo eran "HIPOCRITOS" que hablaban tantas cosas de ti a sus espaldas solo para hacerte ver mal sabiendo que ese no era el caso. Pero estoy feliz por ti, sorprendido de que te hayas escapado sin ningún problema.

Mira cómo están las cosas ahora. Se dieron cuenta de que realmente eras un buen amigo para ellos. Ya es tarde porque ya has cambiado. Ya no eres lo mismo que antes. Ya no muestras tus sentimientos a otras personas, incluso si lo saben todo.

No te importa si tienes "AMIGOS." No te importa si las personas dejan de hablarte. Las que no necesitas, van y vienen. Algunas personas vienen que hubieras deseado durante mucho tiempo en tu vida. Pero dicen la gente llega en el momento adecuado.

Te diré algo. Te extraño mucho. Ya que eras cariñoso, juguetón, pero no es mejor que continúes así porque no quiero que me lastimen. Prefiero que me digan que se cree que eres una odiosa y que no pueden soportarlo. Que te digan mi mensaje y que dejas que la gente haga lo que quiere. Me gusta más tu forma de ser ahora mismo. Sigue así "LUPITA". Gracias por apoyar todo.

-Esmeralda

Del Beat: Tienes mucha razón, la gente va y viene en nuestras vidas, y las que se quedan son las únicas que importa. Pero eso no significa que no podemos aprender algo de las personas que se van. Siempre tenemos que estar agradecido por el tiempo que ellos invirtieron en nosotros.

Thank You For Everything

Thank you for overcoming all those things that I thought you would never be able to overcome and also for supporting a lot of people, including those that didn't want you to be anything in life.

Little by little, you found out who was good for you and who just wanted to see you miserable. You thought just because they were so called "FRIENDS" that they were your friends, but there were just hypocrites that talked a bunch of stuff behind your back just to see you doing bad, knowing those things weren't true. But I am happy for you and surprised that you escaped without a single problem.

Look at how things have turned out. They found out that you were really a good friend for them. It's too late now because you have changed. You are not the same person you once were. You don't show your emotions to other people even if they know it or not.

You don't care if you have "FRIENDS." You don't care if people stop talking to you or not. The ones you don't need come and go. Sometimes some show up and you wish they would've showed up a long time ago in your life. But it is said that people come into your life at the appropriate time.

I will tell you something. I miss you a lot. You were always sweet, playful, but it's better you continue your path because I don't want to get hurt. I prefer for people to think that I'm a hater and that nobody can stand that. They will tell you my message and let people do what they want to do. I like the way you are right now. Keep being that way "LUPITA." Thanks for all your support.

-Esmeralda

From The Beat: You're right, people will come and go into our lives and the ones that stay are the ones that matter, but that doesn't mean that we can't learn something from the ones that do leave. It's always good to be grateful for the time anyone invests in you.

I wrote with all my feelings and anger I felt.

Do Over

I would like to have a "do over." Reason I would want a "do over": I regret being around the wrong people doing all types of things. They shouldn't have me around them; I'm playing a part. Just by being with them got me in trouble.

-Cristal

From The Beat: Being around the wrong people is like a practice round for knowing which ones are worth keeping and fighting for. If you are right, then they were wrong. You'll get another round at hanging with the right people.

Costly Advice

The worst advice I ever took was from my homie—told me to hit a homeless person with my car. The homeless man lived on my street and he was always causing trouble. No one liked him. One day he was in the middle of the street and my homie said, "Hit him." So that's what I did. At the time it was fun but I went to jail for eight months.

-Domien

From The Beat: We must agree with you, that sounds like the worst advice. Next time someone tells you to do something, think twice. It can be easy to follow the crowd but it might not get us what we need.

Better

I became a better person because the old me wouldn't care about anything. I would just smoke and gangbang with my homies. All I would do is chill with them and go do bad stuff. I wouldn't care about school. I would go but I do nothing most of the time.

I became a better person because all I do now is stay in school and focus. I don't hang around my homies any more. I try to stay busy so I won't have time to hang out with them. I'm starting college and plan to keep on going. My goal is to become a food inspector. Also, live a good life without worry.

-Melissa

From The Beat: Nice plan you got there. Strive hard for your goal, and stick to your plan, even if it may go awry at certain points.

The Worst Advice

The worst advice I got was when I was fourteen years old. I was with kids my age and we had got some weed from this guy we know. This was my first time smoking so I didn't know what was going to happen but I wanted to do it.

When I saw my friends high, I thought it was funny. So they told me, "When you high you feel ten times better," so that made me want to try it. Since that first time, I never stopped. That was bad advice too 'cause I love smoking. It helps with my problems and keeps me on zero when my anger is on ten.

-Semaj

From The Beat: We challenge you to explore other ways to keep calm. There will be situations where you'll need to rely on just yourself to stay collected. Eventually you won't need any substances to feel better.

A Letter To Yourself

One time I wrote a letter and just wrote all my problems in one paper. I thought I was crazy but I only just needed to let it all out and I don't trust anybody but myself. Each sentence, I wrote with all my feelings and anger I felt.

-Rachel

From The Beat: We're not perfect creatures. Sometimes we need to vent out things that are bothering us. Sometimes those things don't need to be placed by someone else and simply just need to be released.

YOUTH JUSTICE COALITION / FREE LA HIGH SCHOOL, INGLEWOOD, CA

World Without Borders

A world without borders would be the greatest thing in existence. A border in the world, either in a country or a community, can hinder people from their own growth.

If there were no borders, I believe people would have more opportunities—opportunities for a better life and opportunities to have life changing experiences and long lasting good memories.

Borders make it possible to stop someone from bettering themselves and keeps families separated.

-Stevieon

From The Beat: You're right. Boxing people in for the sake of "protecting" them may not always be in their best interest. At the end of the day you have to ask who is protecting whom from what? Or who is selfishly concealing power and control.

The Last Time I Felt Good – In My Dreams, Last Night

The last time I really felt good was when I was asleep. Literally 'cause I had the best dream ever. I can't explain myself. I don't know where to start but it was the best feeling ever. The world seemed right and nothing was wrong with the world.

I like for instance, last night, I had a dream that I just finished high school and received my diploma. I graduated and got my first car.

My daughter turned three years old and we had just got our first apartment—me, Skii, and Diamond.

Diamond's my girlfriend/wife and we were living our best life. Money was good. I was going to college. My girlfriend had a good job, 'till I woke up, that is. The dream was over and reality hit me.

-Bella

From The Beat: Waking up from a dream doesn't mean it's not a possibility. Don't sell yourself short. We're made to dream for a reason.

Like A Basketball

Love is like a basketball when a basketball gets tossed around.

Love now has a bond. I'm on your mind.

Blink now, you see me. Like bee's see honey.

-Melissa

From The Beat: Love is like a basketball. Resilient. Don't ever let it deflate.

We Are Good People

I believe us humans, no matter the color of our skin, should be treated equally, just as any other race there is.

Us Spanish and Black people should be treated with respect and dignity. Just like any other fellow American. We should not be judged by the color of our skin. We are not criminals, rapists, etc., as they portray us to be. We are just as hardworking as any other person. We are good people.

-Xenna

From The Beat: We agree. Many find it easier to dictate and polarize a group of people as opposed to individually judging each other by our actions and behaviors alone. We are all capable of inhuman behavior.

Police Harassment

I was walking with my friends to the store when the police pulled up on us. They hopped out and said, "Ya'll some Gangbangers," and cuffed us. They were up and like in the way "we know you guys are gangbangers 'cause y'all took from the store on the corner."

We said, "No, we didn't." So they took us to the store to identify us. The store people said it wasn't us.

-George

From The Beat: As social creatures, we are bred to be judgmental—from any standpoint. Based on our looks, our actions, our families, our culture, our political views, etc. See it as a lesson learned for them.

There is No Evidence

It's not me. In the beginning of the year I was in a car in (the city of) Pomona, CA. traveling on the freeway to Gardena, CA. Suddenly we were flashed by the police in El Monte, CA.

Upon approaching us they claimed they pulled us over for no lights. I was then searched and profiled. They told me to repeat what they said to me or they would take my son. Then they ran my name and ticketed me for loitering with intent. Not only that, they took my phone, saying it was for evidence and left me stranded with my kid to find my way home.

After that, I was in a neighborhood by my aunt's house, where I was being messed with by police and because of where I had been previously, they gave me another ticket with the same charges and no evidence.

When I forgot a court date a warrant was then put out for my arrest. When finally appearing in court I got my case dismissed.

About a month later I was walking down the street where I was hopped out on. The sheriffs asked me if I was "working" because I had on a little outfit in the summer. We all know it gets hot. Because of these continuous charges I have chose to take my cases to trial.

-Amber

From The Beat: Unfortunately when you are a part of the system it is hard to get out. We know you are completely capable of clearing your name, but work extra hard to keep it clear. Keep fighting and never give up!

I Believe...

I believe that everyone can change and improve themselves. Everyone has their bad times and some people live their bad time everyday. But that doesn't mean they can't overcome it and improve within themselves. You are supposed to learn from your mistakes and make better decisions.

All throughout school, I have started the year great—always paying attention. Then when I start getting comfortable, I start talking and being distracted or being the one to distract. But then my teacher gives me a chance to improve and be the student she knows I am.

-RJ V

From The Beat: Everyone is capable of improving themselves. Starting off great and waning a little is only natural. We're not robots. Even batteries lose their juice over time. But unlike batteries we are capable of restoring ourselves through many means.

No Good Days

There really isn't a day I felt good. One particular day I felt bad was on January 30th 2018. The day stayed cool until 6:38pm. My baby daddy had gotten shot. I felt at my worst. I was down. Didn't feel good at all. Everything seemed like a dream. I was depressed and I felt like there was no reason to live.

-Jennifer

From The Beat: Nothing can make up for such a loss. But there is always a reason to live—live with the memory of him and make him proud.

The Struggle

I struggle with school and family communication. My goal is to get my diploma and go to college. My other goal is to get a job. I want to save up for a car or a house.

My family used to talk me down, saying I'm not going to get my diploma or a job. I'm in the process and I'm going to reach my goal.

-Trey

From The Beat: Being in the process is better than not trying at all. If others talk you down, please don't allow yourself to also talk yourself down. Reach that goal.

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My Positive Message

A message I can give is do everything in your ability to maintain on a positive route and always be humble. Treat others how you wish to be treated. Live a legal lifestyle to avoid imprisonment.

For those people with no father in their life, or any parents at all- be the parent you wanted in your life.

Always keep hope, faith, and trust in yourself to better yourself. Trust your process.

-Jamaal

From The Beat: This is a great message! Do your best to spread it. It is coming from a genuine source.

A Speech

I am Camron from the Youth Justice Coalition. A year ago, I went to Crenshaw High. I kept getting in trouble, not listening to the teacher, getting kicked out of school, fighting etc.

What really made me slow down was when I went to Sylmar Juvenile Hall. Now I'm at Chuco's. They help with a lot of things that a regular school didn't do for me.

Today, I plan on going to college when I'm eighteen. Chuco's saved me from a lot of things and helped me. I learned how to ask for a break when I needed it. I learned how to do most of my work. I learned how to communicate with my peers.

-Camron

From The Beat: We're glad you were able to receive the help you needed and glad you benefited from it. We encourage you to stick your plans. Learning to do your work and communicating with others are very important!

Change

I changed a lot because I feel like I wouldn't care about school as much. I wouldn't care about my high school diploma. Now I actually care. I wake up early, go to school, and get done what I have to get done. Also, I don't be out on the streets no more like how I used to.

I actually stay home and just do my homework and chill. I also plan on going to college and having a good job. I also don't have friends that make me do bad things when I'm with them. I changed over a year ago because I feel like I have everything planned out. I actually care about my life and everything I do.

-Melissa

From The Beat: You'd be surprised how people can overlook the act of caring. Caring takes a lot more than just going through motions or doing things because you have to or because you don't want to let others down.

My Boy, Kevin

I look up to my boy, Kevin, because he just has a lot of knowledge that he shows me. I also see the way he carries himself with respect and humbleness. I've only known him for about a year now and we vibe, like he has been my brother since the sandbox.

I learn a lot from him as well as show him he has a lot to learn. I envy the part about him where, he's just all around a solid friend. By solid, he is a just person I could always kick it around. I really want to see the best for him and I would love for him to accomplish his dreams and goals in life.

His example of chasing dreams just makes me more determined to accomplish mine. He also shows me that I need to pay a lot more attention to my self-reflection. I also appreciate his honesty and realness.

-Da'Ron

From The Beat: Sounds like a great person to look up to. We immerse ourselves in those who we relate to, we share things in common with, and sometimes we immerse ourselves with those who complement us.

Working Toward a Better Me

I feel in order to create world change we must first change ourselves. I am a person working on making everyday life changes. My life has been hard and only has gotten better once I made even the smallest change. I am a witness of how change is most likely a more healthy life choice. The world is too big to change as a whole but with one person at a time is a good start.

-Jamaal

From The Beat: We are glad you are making the effort to change. If you feel the need to, it's probably because you want to. Keep at it!

Thanks Be To God

I'm Basilio S. I was born in Guatemala. I came from Central America where I lived on the streets. I grew up on the streets. Here, I looked for a job and started experiencing life. A lot of things happened in my life but God helped me to figure things out and start looking for my goals, how all men start.

First, I changed myself. I took care of myself and started building better things for me. At the end of the day, it was really hard but through everything I learned to not give up. Never give up on your life. Don't waste time on things that don't matter. Life is hard but you have to learn from it. No pain, no gain. Experiences matter.

Thanks to God for my life and how hard it was. Now I can see a different world and I can build a better future for me. Everyday in the morning, I show love and take care of myself.

-Basilio

From The Beat: Continue to show love for yourself. And never stop taking care of yourself. We're glad you can look to God, or into someone for support in times of trouble. We all need that whether we're willing to admit it or not. Figuring things out is a never-ending cycle of life!

Time of Resentment

A time I felt resentment was when I was at school and a friend wanted to start helping me make money. He gave me some merchandise to sell. On that same day, I gave the merchandise to another friend who I thought I could trust. He told me he wanted to see his brother because the two of them were thinking of buying it.

As the day went on, he hadn't come back. I waited for his brother, too, but they had already left. I felt all types of feelings in that moment. I eventually overcame it the next day and I forgave him but I'll never forget it.

-Jacob

From The Beat: We applaud you. Not many people can get over something so quickly, especially if they had put their trust into them. That shows just how mature of a person you are!

Attitude Adjustment

If I were to give a speech about who I was a year ago, I would say that my attitude has changed as well as my interest in what I want to do in life. Reason why I picked attitude was because I have a "don't give a flip" type of attitude. I didn't really care about life or the consequences.

My attitude was more of getting respected and known. I would see people doing bad stuff getting money and being respected, known, and loved by others. My interest in life changed because before I didn't know what I wanted to be. All I was back then was a nobody doing wrong and trying to be someone on a road to death, the way I was viewed.

-Fernando

From The Beat: There's nothing wrong with working towards being respected and known. It's just how you go about it! There are positive ways to gain respect. Can you think of some?

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A Letter To Me

Dear Blakk,

I don't know about you, man, but I know the life I'm living right now is good no matter what, because you have family to help support you. I believe we should keep the name Blakk because we fit that name.

Me, in this part, is that you, you should have believed in to keep situations the same and be able to garner confidence to not be so nerve-wracked. Realize everything happens for a reason and not everything is towards you.

You make who you are and when you find your true self always embrace it no matter what other people's perception is. You're strong but you trust too much. You make the right choice. Don't be forced into it. Watch everybody. No matter what.

-Jacob

From The Beat: That's a letter many should send to themselves! Keep your confidence, and when you lose it-fake it until you make it.

Freedom

Freedom is about standing up for people who have the rights. All people, all equal. All equal with all the laws. Most people think freedom is to do "what I want." (Unfortunately) Freedom is conditional.

People do have the right to speak, act, and pursue happiness, ideally without anybody or external restrictions. Freedom is important, though, because it leads to enhanced expression of creativity and original thought. It leads to increased productivity and overall high quality of life.

The most important parts of freedom are the freedom of religion, of speech, of the press, and to petition to right the wrongs in which to have what we have. The American Revolution, our war against the British forces, eventually led to a declaration of independence within these United States, i.e. our Declaration of Independence.

-ST

From The Beat: We agree that freedom is important and that we must do our best to protect it. What areas of your life do you feel the most freedom? Where would you like more?

An Elder

My grandpa is important to me because when he was alive I would talk to him about how I like to play instruments with him and sing on his microphone. He was the only person that would help me so I could get better. I would go to his house every Tuesday, so I could have piano lessons with him or he would give me new instruments to play.

My grandpa and I were close, and I never had a problem with him. I remember when he used to take me to this park so I could watch him and his friends play the drums. It sounded so good. I went with him every Sunday. Sometimes if my grandpa could not have piano lessons with me he would tell my uncle to help me because my uncle knew how to play instruments.

Before my grandpa died he was teaching me how to play the clarinet and I learned how to play it but I forgot how to play it after he died. I wish he were still here to finish teaching me how to play different instruments. My grandpa would make videos of him and me playing instruments and singing.

It would just be him and me but sometimes my little brother would come with us. He liked some of the instruments. My grandpa had a lot in his house and backyard but I only remember the name of some of them. I miss my grandpa and I wish he were still here to teach me more.

-Shaquana

From The Beat: Your grandpa was an amazing man. Continue to practice and play instruments. Pass on that knowledge to your own kids. Your grandpa will forever live through the beautiful things he taught you in life.

The Difference

The difference between me now and me from one year ago is that I see life totally differently. I'm only seventeen but I've changed a lot since my last birthday.

At first, I saw life as a joke and everything was about having fun. All I did was party, smoke, and do dumb things with my friends who usually got me into trouble. I felt like I had nothing to lose, so I started running around in the streets with a crowd of boys and girls that like getting into trouble as much as I did.

We would go to the mall to steal, rob people on the streets, and even steal cars. My first time going to jail was my on my fifteenth birthday.

At first, I thought going to jail made me look cool because of all the attention I was getting from family and friends. So, I started staying in the house more and took a break from social media.

I kept to myself. My dad just recently got out of prison from doing fifteen years and he'd been giving me a lot of life lessons on acting like a man and not like a boy. He tells me not to depend on anyone but myself. He's one of the reasons I want to succeed.

-Damien

From The Beat: Doing dumb things in life is a given. We are all taught the right and wrongs way to live, but doing wrong in life doesn't make you a wrong person. You're human, you were young, and you still have a lot of growing up to do. Do your best to succeed in life. We know you can do it!

If I Could Go Back

If I could go back to do something over, I would go back to seventh grade. I would go back to that grade because I took some real bad advice. The advice was from a so-called "friend" I had, but I did not know any better. I was young and just wanted money for myself, I never wanted to ask momma for nothing. She had so much on her mind and I put her through too much already.

One day, my friend wanted me to do a favor for him. I was going to make money out of the favor so I took it. The favor I took required me to sell weed. I was making money so I saw nothing wrong with what I was doing. I was a seventh grader, with a pound of weed, going to school with it until I got caught and expelled.

-Domingo

From The Beat: We never really know "any better" at such young ages. In fact, people of varying ages still don't know "any better." Living is constantly learning, even if we had to learn in a harder way than we'd like.



"Dare to Dream" by Jesse Milo

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"Insular Positive Thinking" by James Lee

That Label

A label that was given to me was Blakk Blakk. It happened in the seventh grade. A female told me "you are really dark" and that she was going to name me Blakk with two K's and because I am extra black my name is Blakk Blakk. Around that time it made me feel bad and I didn't love my skin and have enough courage to stand up.

-Jacob

From The Beat: Its no fun being called something you don't like. It sounds like you don't mind the nickname now. Sometimes we can take back the power of a label.

Judged

I have been labeled something hurtful before. Something that could possibly ruin my reputation.

It was hurtful that someone who didn't even know me could talk bad about me. They didn't even know me, and they could say things like she's this and she's that, discriminating against me.

-Ro'Anna

From The Beat: Unfortunately this is when we are judged the most, when people don't know us. It still hurts but we just have to remind ourselves who we really are.

Who Am I?

Who am I? A young project baby growing up in the trenches. I like working out. I have been trying to get my size up since I was behind them cells. I get angry fast. I lose my temper pretty quick.

I am trying to make it in the hood for myself because nothing came good with that. I'm 5'6", a loyal person, truthful and trust worthy. I'll never rat on my guys. I'm an Aries.

-Julio

From The Beat: Be who you think you are, be who you want to be, be you! Nothing is more truthful than being the person you want to be.

Dreaming

The last time I really felt good was when I was asleep literally because I had the best dream ever. I can't explain myself, I don't know where to start, but it was the best feeling ever. The world seemed right and nothing was wrong in this city we live in. For instance last night I had a dream I just finished high school and I received my diploma. I graduated and I got my first car my daughter turned three, we had just received our first apartment! Money was good. I was going to college. My sister had a good job and we both were bringing in good income until I woke up and the dream was over and reality hit me.

Reality for me is hard. It really is, especially 'cause I'm a single parent and only twenty-years-old. I haven't finished high school and I have a two-year-old daughter with help only from my family. My mom, my aunt, my brother, and my sister all help. I remind you, it's just my family that helps me 'cause they our on my side.

Her "biological dad " however doesn't help with anything. He doesn't even try to come spend time with her. He doesn't pop up to see her. He doesn't give her a phone call. He doesn't even send her things she needs like milk, clothes, shoes, pampers, and medicine. Don't get me wrong she is well taken care of; she has everything she needs and more. I'm just simply saying as a 'dad' or 'father' you have responsibility and as a man you need to take care of them. Her dad lacks the responsibility of being a parent. He would rather choose studio time over spending time with his daughter. But as I said before, she has everything she needs including a stepfather who loves her just like if she was his own. He goes out his way to make her day. He does whatever he can for her and if he can't do it he still finds a way to make it work for Skii. They do a lot together and he treats her like she's supposed to be treated.

Reality for me was when my beautiful little angel was born if knew right then and there that my partying days were over and hanging out with friends would be slowed down. All of my attention goes to her and

school, school is hard when you're pregnant so that why I wasn't able to finish on time but I'm in school still pushing to get my diploma not just for me but for my daughter.

Skii was born 25 weeks she was a very small premature baby born at 1 pound 12 ounces 12 ½ inches long. I was so scared I cried and cried everyday and prayed that she would be all right because she was so small, she can fit just in the palm of your hand. Doctors said a lot of things to me when she was born because she was so small and wasn't fully developed. I always kept faith and believed she would turn out just fine 'cause she a fighter like her mom.

She is now 2 ½ years old now and is the best thing that ever happened to me. She's smart, funny, adorable has the brightest smile that lights up the darkness her name is Skii Denise Renae Williams.

I remind you its Skii with two I's and not a y because she's different. She has two birthdays and she has a green spot on the side of her face kind of reminds you of Mike Tyson's tattoo on the side of his face. Hers are called Mongolian spots, which are very common in any parts of the body of dark skinned babies. The are flat, grayish and blueish in color almost looking like a bruise. They can be large and small and Skii has them everywhere. She also has a hemangioma spot on the tip of her head. I just call it her unicorn horn 'cause she's my little unicorn and a hemangioma is just another type of birthmark often appearing as a rubbery, bright red nodule of extra blood vessels. All these complications were 'cause she was born so early but that didn't affect her. She moves, talks and learns just as fast as everybody else her age. With everything she had to go through you would think her biological dad would want to be apart of this miracle but I guess not and that's fine too 'cause we're forever going to be straight.

-Roanna

From The Beat: Your love for your beautiful daughter is very apparent and she sounds very special. She has everything she needs in her life, it sounds like you have enough love for three parents! Keep us posted on you, your education and your family, we are listening! We appreciate all you share!

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Uniting Through Cosplay

A lot of people doubt themselves and lose confidence when told they are fat or because of their skin color or they can't do what they love. I love cosplay and dress up as characters from my favorite shows. I know I'm not skinny but I don't let people bring me down and stop what I love doing no matter my size. I just learn to ignore them rather than letting them drag me down.

Internal struggles have become a fairly normal aspect of our everyday lives. It seems as if everyone has their own mental and emotional issues, and the cosplay community is no different. Whether you're in Malaysia, America, Japan or anywhere in the world. The difference is how these specific groups of people react to cosplay as a medium and how the general public sees them.

As someone who grew out of my self-esteem issues through cosplay, I can quite confidently say that cosplay has definitely taken its toll on me in both negative and positive ways. I've thought about it and figured that, for me, it was a vicious cycle of gaining confidence in my appearance but also constantly comparing myself with others, looks-wise and skill-wise. I started off with little to zero self-esteem, which turned into having a good level of confidence and self love, to feeling like I wasn't good enough when I looked at my own cosplays compared with others.

Of course, everyone's experience with cosplay in terms of self-esteem is different and unique to each individual. There are also many different ways that cosplay can affect one's mindset and sense of self worth. Let's talk about that. I've asked a few cosplayers within our local community both veteran and new on how their self-esteem was affected by our beloved hobby. Let's start on how it positively affects cosplayers.

Cosplay is undoubtedly a hobby that has many upsides. The positives include an increase in self-confidence and a certain sense of pride in having learned and/or mastered a new skill.

As we all know, cosplay doesn't simply include just makeup and looking good. Prop making and sewing are both skills that also come in very handy for cosplay. The learning process is a never-ending journey to having a good time and gathering new experiences.

Some cosplayers, including myself, have lost copious amounts of weight in the name of either fitting into costumes that we accidentally bought a size smaller or simply just to be happy with how we look in a costume with our individual ideal weights. In turn, we start to like ourselves more because we managed to hit a certain milestone, appearance-wise, with cosplay being a major motivating factor. Thus, an increase in self-love and self-confidence occurs.

External factors include a welcoming positive community that is supportive and constructively critical about one's cosplay, allowing cosplayers to improve and spot their own trouble areas. Improving in

something is part and parcel to feeling more confident in one's own skills and abilities. To feel like you fit in somewhere will infinitely cause you to strive for improvement and try new things. Better self esteem out of cosplay. People tend to become braver in trying out new fashion styles that fit them and so births a medium to continue their growth outside of cosplay. Some have testified that after cosplay, they speak better in presentations and public speaking bothers them less. The simple act of speaking to new people in general, which used to be a challenge, slowly begins to fade into nothing the more involved they got with cosplay and its community.

Like everything else, cosplay isn't perfect. Cosplay can have quite the negative impact and one of the most common has to do with one's identity as a cosplayer. As human beings, we tend to compare ourselves to others, and let's face it, it's pretty discouraging to see that someone who started cosplaying around the same time as you have a bigger following or superior skills. If you aren't a competitive person or an optimist even, the impact from this will mostly be negative.

Other than that, there is the case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. From what I have observed from the safety of the sidelines, certain communities are quite unkind towards cosplayers who don't meet certain standards of accuracy or beauty. It completely baffles me but it does happen, and when it does, it really isn't pretty. Some cosplayers have been told to stop cosplaying altogether just because they don't meet the standards of the average cosplay content consumer. It leaves a really bad taste in my mouth and probably a traumatizing experience for those who have faced it. However, some cosplayers tough through it and actually use it as encouragement to improve. It's something I've learnt to respect a lot.

It's no secret that cosplayers face sexual harassment openly at events and conventions no matter what the gender, age or situation. It seems that some people just can't get the importance of consent. It doesn't matter if one is in cosplay or not, consent before contact is very important. This is one of the main causes of cosplayers feeling degraded and anxious when attending public events in more revealing cosplays. It also affects their self-esteem in a negative way.

I ask of you the reader, as the author of this article and a casual cosplayer, please keep your hands to yourself until you get full proof consent from the cosplayer(s). Cosplay is also something that tends to make certain people conscious about their bodies. Whether it's their skin color, their body shape, whether they're double-lidded or not and even the condition of their skin on any visible part of their bodies. Nobody is perfect but that doesn't stop one's mind from venturing into negative thoughts and emotions.

-Cassandra

From The Beat: Wow! Thanks for teaching us so much about cosplay. We can see how it would be fun to dress up as someone we admire on occasion. We can also see how it can get competitive. Thanks for sharing about cosplay. We certainly hope this is not the last time we hear from you. We would love to hear more from you.

Life Advice

Forget everybody.
Think about yourself first.
When it comes down to it, you're all you have.

-LaTiera

From The Beat: It is true, we must always think about what is best for us first. But that means even when we are the ones sabotaging ourselves.

One Step Forward

There have been moments in my life where I don't like something. I try to change it when it's possible, but sometimes it doesn't work out so I have to change the way I feel about that certain something. It took a lot of hard work and thinking. It wasn't easy as you think it would be, because there were some sacrifices made to make this jurassic change for me.

-Ismael

From The Beat: That is impressive. Many people have a hard time changing their attitude! What did this change entail?



"Cheers" by Arnaldo Juarez

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The One Do Over

The one and only things I would start over again is going back to the third grade. That's when I started slacking.

I know it's such a young age. I don't quite know why. I guess it was the family crisis I was going through and the separation of my parents. I started missing school so much to the point where I had to repeat the third grade.

My fourth through sixth grades were good. I was always going to school and I had excellent grades. When seventh grade came, I started slacking again, hanging out with the wrong people. I started drinking, smoking marijuana, and skipped school a lot. I didn't even get to go into the eighth grade. They skipped me right into the ninth grade due to my "age."

My ninth grade year was good, can't complain. Tenth grade came and it didn't start so well. I stopped going to school and started working full time instead.

I'm a very smart girl—school/grade wise—but the decisions I made weren't so smart. I always wished to start over but now I'm on the right path. I came to Chuco's to finish my last two years of high school. I'm now twenty-years old and in my senior year. I'm a full time student and full time employee. Don't let anyone tell you there's no such thing because there is. If I can do it, you can do it.

If you know someone just like me, encourage them, encourage yourself to do better. Follow your goals and dreams.

-Xenna

From The Beat: Many of us have bad habits. The important thing is we shouldn't let them hinder our lives, more so just coast along with us, if possible. We applaud you, not many people can work and go to school full time. Keep us posted on your journey, we are listening!

One Thing

One thing I wish wouldn't happen to me is having my head busted so many times because I lose my memory. I've lost so many memories, even the ones with my sister that passed away. I can't remember her. I've also lost other memories of other loved ones but the main one that hurts is not being able to remember my sister.

-Yermundo

From The Beat: We wish for your wish to come true. Having a good head on your shoulders is very important. There are other ways to remember her by, looking at photos, talking to family and friends, or going through her stuff. They may not bring back the memories themselves but it might help strike up a chord.

Dear New Me:

You are doing better.

We're going to make this money.

You're going to be bomb.

All these people are going to be mad that you're doing you.

You're going to find you some true love.

-Breanna

From The Beat: Strong words with such a nice ring to it. Please, we entreat you to follow through on this!

Lessons on Trust

Trusting someone is like handing somebody your heart because you can't expect what you may not get back. You need trust no matter what happens. You will always need TRUST that is honestly the key to life.

For an example in a relationship you need trust. Trust me, there's no relationship out there that will make it in life. Loyalty to a friend, family, or even a relationship can kill you. Be honest, at least.

All I ever wanted is love, trust, and loyalty from family or even a relationship but it's hard to find anywhere. Growing up I saw my Dad arguing with my mom over nothing, but only because he didn't trust her. He has broken her heart many times but yet my mom is still with him. It's crazy how loyalty and trust can kill a relationship and family.

-Nahun

From The Beat: Sometimes we need to learn to trust ourselves before we trust others. We do this by following our hearts and making decisions we know are right for us, even if they are difficult.

So Far

So far the period in my life, were I'd like to start over is in 2015 when I was in ninth grade, going to Westchester. The main reason is because I failed that year and it set me back. I also started picking up bad habits and getting in trouble. At the time I was just having fun and enjoying high school. My brother was also going there so that had me distracted a lot too.

If I would have that chance to start over it would be me getting straight A's and perfect attendance. I would have joined football that year and probably would have scholarships by now. With those changes, my life would have played out differently and would have made things better.

-RJ

From The Beat: It's never too late to join a football/sports league. It may not get you scholarships but it'll keep you in shape and you'll make new friends. If your bad habits still stick with you just pick up a lot of good habits to balance it out, or possibly, tip you more over into the good habits.

Do Over

A day I'd do over is Friday. I would change that day because the events that took place that day were pretty reckless, a long fight happened.

I would change how the fight went down; too many people handled the situation wrong by jumping into a fight that didn't need their input. The people who fought should've arranged it to a different time and place.

-Jacob

From The Beat: Sounds reasonable. Whatever their reasons for jumping in, selfless or selfish, not everyone needs to step into the ring. Is there anything anyone could have done to prevent this?

Reach Out to Us!

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Something Courageous

Something that is really courageous that my dad did was crossing over to the USA at the age of thirteen. He came, all alone. He had to survive for himself. Later on, my grandmother sent my dad's brother. He had to take care of himself and his brother.

-Domingo

From The Beat: That is courageous. Moving to a new country is frightening; we can only imagine how it must be for someone so young. You're a testament to your father's courage and strength. Prove to your father you can be just as courageous in life!

SECOND CHANCE ESSAYS

H.O.P.E.

H.O.P.E. means Healing Of People's Emptiness. In the Bible, it says to forgive yourself and Christ will forgive your sins. Hope means second chances that you collect and deserve. I'm filled with hope and second chances.

This essay is for the people like the Declaration of Independence. It's only different because those who feel lonely don't feel free. Those feelings should change with the powerful meaning of hope and forgiveness. Hope will heal the person's soul, body and mind. Forgiveness will clean out the sin of the blood, which will let you be cleansed out like the Holy Water.

In my personal experience, I have been caught for a high-crime act, but somehow I'm getting a slap on the wrist for which I'm very much grateful. I ended up going to placement for a year and was in juvenile hall for the whole summer. I smiled through it all and kept my head up the entire time. I asked God to forgive me and I let Him down countless times. I deserve to be back in juvenile hall and that is why I will serve four to six months at placement again. This time, I'm not going to let down God, my sister and myself.

I took my chance and did not own up to it. This is my millionth chance to be successful. I can feel it in the air. Yesterday was another day; today is the chance of my lifetime. I was born with high expectations by my family, that is why I have to own up to this situation.

In the beginning of my teenage and middle-school years, I was empty. I started reading and writing, so I wouldn't think about my life. I lost a best friend and a grandfather. Reading about the poverty and struggles of others made me realize I'm a rich kid by having to share a room with my brother. Also, having two parents in the same household. That is when I realized I should not be sad or angry. Everyday, I would show up with a smile. I even smiled when someone called me "Beaner" and my own culture called me "Gringo" because of my light skin. I enjoyed these names because I knew others were going through much worse.

It's funny how I smiled when I got stabbed and jumped because I knew I had H.O.P.E. and mostly importantly God on my side. I was close to death, but God gave me a second chance.

A Poem Called H.O.P.E.

Love, hate and appreciate
Healing Of People's Emptiness (HOPE)
Second chance with lots of stress
Deep breaths but still a mess

Forgiveness to the loneliness
Smiley 'cause of all the hope,
Past was at the bottom rope
Present hope at the top of the globe

Blind to every other chance
Sweaty nightmares to what he sees
Emptiness so goes back to the clan
Another chance broken in one half

Everyone to love and not to hate
Only themselves to appreciate
Smile through the burning cell
Get up even if you had fell.

-Jose, Santa Cruz, CA

If we spend our time living
in the past how are going
to be able to look forward
to future.

From The Beat: What you're about to read are more of the amazing submissions that came to us through our 2019 Art and Essay Contest. In January we asked our community, "Why give someone a second chance, or many chances? When have you given, or been given another chance?"

These pieces are inspirational and heartbreaking, both motivating and challenging. From stories of forgiveness, to crossing the border, to the death of a loved one at the hands of police, each writer's take on what a "second chance" really means to them is sure to leave an impression in your mind and heart. We're filled with gratitude for the depth and sincerity our writers put into this contest, as it reminds us of the strength and perseverance within each one of us. We are surviving and thriving together.

Please join us in welcoming the brilliant effort and talent behind each of these contributions to Second Chances. Thank you, again and always, to the writers and artists who make this work the beautiful journey that it is.

Do It For You

I think people should be given second chances because people change. They start to realize this ain't what they want in life or this isn't where they want to be. Not everyone is a criminal or bad person. Some of us are just people who have made bad choices/decisions. But I feel like we should all be able to have a chance to redeem ourselves to. So we can be able to prove to the world or should I say society that we aren't really the people we have been accused or thought to be. Others just don't want to see the good in people all they see is the bad. But if we were given a second chance they would be able to see that we are not the people we have been portrayed to be. They just have to give us time to figure out where we went wrong to be able to fix those mistakes so we can rise above the influence and prove everybody else wrong.

That's the only way we are going to be able to find the solution to our problems. But without second chances we often feel like what's the point if everyone already thinks this is who I really am and nothing is going to change that right. If we spend our time living in the past how are going to be able to look forward to future. But to do that you have to be able to forget and forgive one another. Or put yourself in their shoes. How do you know what him/her were feeling at the time? All they want to see is the fault in our actions but never want to really figure out the reasons behind those actions because every action has a reaction.

People should look deep down and see who a person really is instead of judging them so quickly. Which also make them feel like as if they lost all hope and then they continue to do the same things every time. How can anyone make this a new year without giving new chances? That tells me if people can't expect that people can change over time then we are still pretty much living in last year.

Everyone makes mistakes but it's up to us to change them. But how can we change that if society won't let us? Everything happens for a reason. However, this does not mean we have to keep reliving it even if people don't want to believe/expect there has been a change who cares. If you don't do it for anyone else at least do it for you, regardless of what people think. Because change is good it'll help you get where you wish/want to be in life. It might take a lot of time and effort but with the right strategies you can help improve your mistakes. Failure is not an option and sometimes society sets us up to fail. But that why we have to get back up and keep going instead of giving up or your basically letting society win.

Just remember nobody wants to see you doing better than them or just better in general sometimes. People should want to teach and inspire to help others grow but nowadays everyone is to rapped in their selves. But putting people down and making them feel bad about themselves is not the way to go about things either. Whether you know their predicament or not. We are humans, we all make mistakes because nobody is perfect not even God's angels. The only real mistakes are the ones in which we don't learn from. Experts in anything were once beginners to so this is why I believe everyone deserves a second chance whether they were in the wrong or right.

-DeNeija, Roswell, New Mexico

SECOND CHANCE ESSAYS

Youth Honorable Mention

To Know Why We Come Here

I was five years old in 2007, when my mother left Mazatenango, our small village in southern Guatemala. Gangs run that town and evil runs everywhere. I lived with my mom and dad and older brother until my dad started to get into trouble with bad people in town. I never knew what kind of trouble it was, but he couldn't face his problems so he sank himself in alcohol. Soon his problems became our problems. He would come home and abuse my mom and just act crazy. Once I remember he threw my little bicycle at her.

One night my dad got drunk like always, but this night was different because he came home with pure anger. My brother and I brother were sleeping in our room when I woke up to hear my mom screaming and crying. The next thing I saw was my father pouring gasoline around the house and our bed. My brother hugged me because I was so afraid, until my mother's father, who lived next door, came over and beat up my dad. I think he almost killed him. My dad went to jail after that but he didn't stay there long. My mother tried to get a restraining order, but that never happened. We don't really have much of a court system in my country.

A few months after that night that my mother left for the United States, leaving me and my brother with our grandparents. The morning she left I woke up to see my grandma cooking breakfast and crying. I didn't know what was wrong. I thought my mom had just gone to work like always. But then my grandmother gave me a letter my mother wrote to us saying she was trying to find a way to support us. She was doing what she considered was best for us. She said she ran out of options. My father wasn't giving her any money and there was no job for her in our town that paid enough. Later my mom told me she had to try five times to cross over. Each time she was arrested and sent back across the border, but she kept trying until she made it. I didn't know if I was happy for her that she made it or mad or sad. I was just confused.

My mom ended up in San Rafael. She worked two or three jobs at a time, including at Jack in the Box and at car wash.

After seven years, I decided I wanted to follow her. On the phone she told me: "Don't expect it to be paradise. We live like prisoners here. We work and we go home. We're always inside."

I was 12 years old. At first I didn't think it was going to be that hard to just leave my life behind, my grandparents and my brother, but after my grandmother dropped me off with the coyote, it hit me. I cried for most of that first day, as we rode on a truck and then a big bus. People told me to stop crying because someone might think they had kidnapped me.

I was in a group with about 200 people. I didn't know anyone. We took more buses and stayed in hotels. The whole trip took nearly one month because we had to wait to move until the time was right. From northern Guatemala we crossed a river to Mexico by standing on rafts made of tires. The coyotes gave us money they were handing out from duffel bags. When we got to Mexico, we saw two soldiers who told us to stop but some of the men in the group gave them money and they let us go.

We finally got to the U.S. border after crossing another river on rafts. My mother had paid extra for a "special trip" for me so I got

directions as to how I could be arrested by ICE. That way I could stay in the United States and she could pick me up from detention. One of the coyotes told me to walk five minutes straight, five minutes to the left and five minutes to the right and I would see the border police. I heard other people yelling that they were lost but I couldn't help them. I was just a kid. I had to follow the directions.

ICE agents caught me on the border and locked me up in Arizona for a few weeks. My mom had told me I could make one call. I called but she wasn't home. I talked to my stepfather. But nobody came for me. They sent me to Houston where I stayed for six weeks, and then to Portland, Oregon, to a receiving home. I stayed with a family for maybe two months until my mom came to take me.

She came with one of her friends and my little sister, who I'd never met. At first I didn't recognize her. I know she saw my reaction, because when they entered the room, I was just standing there staring at them for a cool minute, until one of the ladies said "Mijo, soy yo tu mama." I ran to her and hugged her.

That was five years ago. My mom was right. It's not paradise. We work hard for less pay than people with papers. And I ended up in Juvenile Hall because I got in trouble with the police. Still, it's a better life than we had. I don't have to watch my mom getting hit anymore, and I have more opportunities. My goal is to go to law school. I want to obey the law and understand the law and help other people like me. I also want to write a book about my trip across the border. I would like Americans to understand us better, to know why we come here.

-Hessler, Marin, CA



"Untitled" by Michael Mackey

I want to obey the law and understand the law and help other people like me.

Who Am I?

I am beautiful and smart, I wonder what I will become
 I hear birds chirping, I see smiles on everyone's face
 I want to fly far away
 I am beautiful and smart
 I pretend I'm in a beautiful magical place
 I feel hate, I touch the sky
 I worry about my future
 I cry when I'm alone
 I am beautiful and smart
 I understand I'm young
 I say I'm strong
 I dream this is just a phase
 I try to work hard, I hope I can change
 I am beautiful and smart
 I believe I am better than this, I am beautiful
 African American young woman
 I am a leader
 I think about all my mistakes
 I am a child of God, I pray night and day
 I am beautiful and smart
 And I will achieve my goals no matter what trouble I come across
 I am beautiful and smart

-Autonaya, San Francisco, CA

New Year Essay

I came into the world crying and fighting. I really had nothing but my mom since a little kid. I grew up holding so much pain and anger inside me. I always felt like I didn't fit in. I felt alone, like I wasn't meant to be in this world. My only memory of my pops was of him abusing my mom. I grew up hating him and promising myself that I would never need him in my life.

After he left us, all I remember is the struggle my mom had to go through just to pay the rent and to take care of me, my brother, and four sisters. I lived with my uncles for a while – they sold drugs for a living. So growing up, I was surrounded by a lot of people who did drugs. My mom would work most days and nights, so I had to learn to take care of myself at a young age. To me, it seemed like it was me against the world.

Though at the time I was going to school, I was always getting into trouble. Always getting suspended or expelled. Me personally, I never cared. I always loved being in the streets, and always loved to fight. I started smoking in like, fifth grade. By the time I was sixteen, I had done almost every drug you can name. It's not something I'm proud of, but drugs really helped me to keep going. I never asked my mom for nothing because to me, she had done enough by giving me somewhere to sleep and food to eat. I started to make my own money slanging drugs and doing little "jobs."

At one point it really hit me that I was lost and alone like never before. I wouldn't go home for weeks and weeks, sleeping in the streets. I knew that whenever I needed somewhere to run, my homies were always there. I started really getting into banging when I was fifteen. Me always being out in the streets and hardly ever being home, I earned my stripes pretty quick. I ended up making sure my hood always came first because I felt like they were the only ones that always had my back when I needed them.

To this day, I still see them as family and got more than enough love for them, but loving my hood so much has led me to end up being behind a cell, writing this to you guys. If I could go back, I wouldn't change anything because I feel like I've learned so much from everything I've gone through, and I believe everything happens for a reason.

Now that I'm locked up I really am trying to straighten my life out and do good, so I can get out as fast as possible to see my mom that I love so much. I wanna get out and make it out the hood, by not doing dumb stuff anymore and trying to live a normal life. Hopefully I make it.

-Eduardo, San Diego, CA

Threat Was a Constant Thing

I was given a second chance and quickly messed it up. I didn't learn from my mistake — the mistake of riding around with guns while risking my freedom, either for the protection of myself or my folks.

The judge and the rest of the world think of us as bad people trying to hurt others, but that's really not the case. We continue doing the same things any normal person would do, such as going out to eat with friends or going out to places around town. But we always decide to put our second chances at risk by keeping the protection of the gun and the bullet near us. Just like many other humans, we have enemies that wish to see us buried in the ground. So at the end of the day, many people would rather be the suspect instead of being the victim.

The system pays no attention to that. They just think you're out to kill. That's why for many of us, there's no such thing as chances. It's either our freedom or our life on the line.

Of course, we think about our families back at home and they're the reason why we want to stay alive, to provide for them and make it back home every day. This system we Mexicans were born in is messed up, but sometimes there's no choice. As an American citizen, I evoke the 2nd amendment of the United States Constitution. We should all have the right to bear arms just like the white folks. But as individuals, Brown individuals stuck in this system, we do not have that right. Police just want to label us all the time, but I say screw that. I never give them that satisfaction til I put my second chance to waste.

I live in an area where threat is a constant thing, but like any living thing I learned to adapt. I learned to make the best out of everything. I learned to get out of the way when I knew things wouldn't be in my favor because like everyone else, I don't like to lose although I know how to take a loss.

It's all a matter of bouncing back. I've been living this life my entire life and the older I got, the more I wanted to elevate in life but that wasn't possible with all the bad things I've been surrounded by. This life wasn't something I chose. It's the life I was given so there's not much I can do about it but keep pushing for the betterment of my life and my family.

-Dago, Santa Cruz, CA



"The Beat Within" by Drew G.

SECOND CHANCE ESSAYS



"The Beat Within" by Keith Erickson

A Slave Who Never Was

You may be able to free write; but I wish I was able to write free
 See the thing about me is I'm just a HUMAN being
 And I really don't know how I'd do free
 Most because I like things with no fee
 And I don't know how to let the bad things be
 But I do know when I'm out
 You'll see me do nothing for clout
 No excuses but I'm going to stay home
 Because outside I'm known to get ruthless
 But inside I still tend to make my own mess -
 I mess up my family but the love I still see from Alyssa and Velli
 They know the true me
 Nickname is Tiny but AMBITION is bigger than he
 Talking small; no, I want it all
 They told me I would fall, but I run when that check calls
 But foolishly I go for easy money CLUELESSLY
 Not knowing what pain I'll bring to the FAMILY I need.
 "I need to be REAL", no, you see "real", I feel like that word is fake
 Because "real" causes people to make mistakes
 "Real" is a word that causes so much hate;
 But KNOWLEDGE - "I need to acknowledge that I need"
 To use my SMARTS more than I abuse my HEART
 To go through with what I need to do
 To not act new when my family needs food
 See me and you, we need but we do not need to TAKE
 To take rubbish from your UGLYNESS or money from your
 wealthiness
 To stay away from being like you I'd rather be wealthy-less;
 Still I am not broke, I still have FAITH to grope
 I still have LOVE I HOPE but nope
 You tried to take that when you took my FREEDOM;
 But my freedom is only a piece of my KINGDOM up top
 And not the heavens but in the BRAINS of my people
 Who use their BRAVERY to get through PAIN you see
 BEATEN like SLAVERY; but in 2k19 it's not called slavery
 It's called the SYSTEM. We try to fight for what's right,
 Then we do wrong and we're in the fight for our LIFE
 Life we live, ALLEIGIANCE we give
 To fake un-promised love given to us by our peers
 So we act out, cry and pout, when things don't go our way
 Well, I'm done crying; TODAY is my CHANGE
 Changing the future so my kids don't have to be
 The slave who never was

-James, Las Cruces, NM

Mistakes should
 be a positive
 experience, not a
 negative one. You
 learn from your
 mistakes to not
 make them again.

A Handcuffed Life

Mistakes are something that everyone has. They are part of life. Mistakes are how we learn. Nobody has ever lived a life where they never made one mistake it's simply impossible. Some may be more serious than others, but in the end, they are all errors and nothing more. That rolling grass hill, the sun shining above, little bluebirds are chirping. You walk along that bubbling stream with your best friend. You turn to say something, open your mouth, it is too late. It just slipped out. You said something you didn't mean to say. All of the grass dies, clouds cover the sky, the birds scatter, the stream dies out. You yell at yourself. Why did you have to say that? Emotions are spinning out of control. Anger, fear, embarrassment, sadness regret. You made a mistake.

You blink; you are running, panting, your heart pounding in your ears. A ragged breath in your ears, your legs about to collapse but you keep going. The phone is clutched in your hands. You took it. Stole it. Why? It just happened. Now what? You don't know it was a simple mistake.

Life is like a seesaw. You make a mistake and your seesaw will tip. If it just tips a little you will fall off. You will be handcuffed to the ground, unable to get up. As you make more and more mistakes, they will roll off you in waves, your handcuffs will become stronger and stronger. Just reach over, inches away, the keys laying, shining, untouched. Where did you start off? Where was your family? At the top of the seesaw? At the bottom? Either way, you can fall. Fall and forever be handcuffed to earth.

I believe that everyone makes mistakes, and everyone should learn from these mistakes. Mistakes should be a positive experience, not a negative one. You learn from your mistakes to not make them again. Your mistake is a gift, not a weight. Everyone deserves a second chance, a chance to learn. As a community, we need to support each other and help each other through hard times. When we make mistakes, we want people to forgive us. We want a second chance. Once someone else makes the mistake we want to punish them. We cannot have that double standard. Our mistakes are our learning tools.

-Suada, San Francisco, CA

Second Chance

I was given a second chance and quickly messed it up. I didn't learn from my mistake — the mistake of riding around with guns while risking my freedom, either for the protection of myself or my folks.

The judge and the rest of the world think of us as bad people trying to hurt others, but that's really not the case. We continue doing the same things any normal person would do, such as going out to eat with friends, or going out to places around town. But we always decide to put our second chances at risk by keeping the protection of the gun and the bullet near us. Just like many other humans, we have enemies that wish to see us buried in the ground. So at the end of the day, many people would rather be the suspect instead of being the victim. The system pays no attention to that. They just think you're out to kill. That's why for many of us, there's no such thing as chances. It's either our freedom or our life on the line.

Of course, we think about our families back at home and they're the reason why we want to stay alive, to provide for them and make it back home everyday. This system we Mexicans were born in is messed up, but sometimes there's no choice. As an American citizen, I evoke the 2nd Amendment of the United States Constitution. We should all have the right to bear arms just like the white folks. But as individuals, Brown individuals stuck in this system, we do not have that right. Police just want to label us all the time, but I say screw that. I never give them that satisfaction 'til I put my second chance to waste.

I live in an area where threat is a constant thing, but like any living thing I learned to adapt. I learned to make the best out of everything. I learned to get out of the way when I knew things wouldn't be in my favor because like everyone else, I don't like to lose although I know how to take a loss.

It's all a matter of bouncing back. I've been living this life my entire life and the older I got, the more I wanted to elevate in life but that wasn't possible with all the bad things I've been surrounded by.

This life wasn't something I chose. It's the life I was given, so there's not much I can do about it but keep pushing for the betterment of my life and my family.

-Dago, Santa Cruz, CA



"Superman" by Michael Mackey

A Second Chance for Change

Have you ever been in any kind of situation when someone or even yourself is asking or even begging for a second chance? I'm pretty sure we all have at some point in our life. We all make mistakes that we will regret at some point. I have, and I've been in so many different kinds of situations where I'm the one asking for another chance or for forgiveness.

The most common situation that we all have as humans is in relationships. This situation can happen to us at any time, and more than likely it will or already has.

The relationship situation I had that I'm gonna tell you about happened about two years ago. I gave a second chance to my ex and I forgave her for cheating on me with my friend. Before I gave her a second chance, I thought about it for a couple of days about why she deserved the second chance. In those days, I thought that she deserved the second chance because she regretted it. She was honest about it and because if she didn't want to be with me, she wouldn't even bother or beg for a second chance. I forgave her and gave her a second chance, but it didn't feel the same. I guess because deep inside of me I had hatred of what she did. So after a few weeks, I let her go.

What I learned from giving a second chance is that sometimes it won't feel the same. It won't go back and fix the mistake that was done. But with that second chance that you give, it will mature the person up and they will think about the consequences of their actions. I know this by personal experience. I've learned from the things I've been through. Every experience has been a lesson I had to go through to be a more mature and experienced person.

I personally think that everyone deserves to be forgiven and deserves to get a second chance in any kind of situation. I think this because when someone gets a second chance they think about their consequences and most likely they won't make that same mistake again. They will hopefully learn from their mistake and improve themselves and give advice to their loved ones to not do the same mistake as they did. Some of us learn from other people's mistakes because we don't want to be in the steps they were in.

Everyone deserves a second chance no matter who he or she is. We got to open our hearts to our community and start giving second chances to make a change in this generation.

-Jesus, Santa Cruz, CA



SECOND CHANCE ESSAYS

Youth Honorable Mention



Chances Are Needed

What is a chance? A chance is a opportunity that is given by someone. Chances can both be use for good and for bad. Chances also can be taken for granted. We all have a moment in life where we wish we could take something back. We all have made mistakes. I personally think everyone deserves chances. I think someone could get a to better their life. I have gotten many chances in my life. I have never taken one. I am in Chaves County Detention Center in Roswell, New Mexico, because I used my chances in the wrong way. If I do get another chance I will use it for good.

Opportunities come and go but chances are hard to get when you have messed up like I have. I also have given many chances. Some chances I'm glad I gave, others I regret. Chances are how people learn from their mistakes. Chances help us learn that actions have consequences good/bad. Chances help us explore who we really are! They help us learn how to hold accountability for the mistakes that we made. We learn to forgive people and move on from the past. When we are given chances. Mistakes help you improve.

Chances are very important to give someone another opportunity to change their life. We are all humans and humans aren't perfect. A chance is a good thing and I wish I took my chances more seriously.

I go to Dexter High School and recently I've been getting into a lot of trouble. I got suspended for having drugs and I didn't know what to do. I was staring to realizing that I don't want to live like that. So when my suspension was over I didn't feed into negativity. I eventually started getting better grades and focusing on school. That was one of my chances that I took.

If people that were in trouble took their chances I think less juveniles would be in the system. Teenagers are lost and doing the wrong things 'cause they need guidance. Teenagers need time to figure out who and what they want to be. People need chances because nobody gets it right the first time. When chances are given people do better in life. Whether you're in jail or on the outs, you should always let someone have another chance because it might change your life for the good. Everyone is equally the same.

Everybody deserves a second, third, fourth, and so on chances. Some people might take advantage of the amount of chances they get so if you get a chance take it 'cause you might not get another. Be careful of the choices you make. Make sure you think before you act. No matter the mistakes you make or made you will always find way to get out of a bad situation.

Chances are a gift given by someone who wants to see you do better in life. No matter who you are you can always do better in life. You can always make better choices. To all that read this you can always make a better choice.

-Dakota, Roswell, New Mexico

Chances are a gift given by someone who wants to see you do better in life.

No More Locked Doors

Rehabilitate - to restore to a former capacity, rank, or right. This is an opportunity for a person to depict and picture the way he or she wants to live their life. A lot of people see this as a chance or a punishment, but in my opinion it's both.

The reason why, I think this is because different faults lead to this predicament. Most cases end up this way because of them not having a solid foundation to build on to start their life. When people in this situation usually don't have reinforcement, they tend to act out and get involved in criminal activity, which lead to incarceration. Then their freedom is taken from them, but in their eyes they can't comprehend what's happening. This causes emotions to be bottled up and released at the same time, which causes a reaction to something they're not aware of.

When released back into society, they won't know how to fend for themselves, so they go back to their old ways, which makes things worse and they unknowingly retaliate without understanding the consequences that follow.

Now back in custody, they try to rehabilitate so they can change their ways, but the true problem is that they listen to things they hear but don't understand it because they are not accustomed to that new change, which makes it look untrustworthy and not promising to them. This not only makes them build a habit, they create a cycle of recidivism.

I personally feel like everyone deserves more than one chance in life. If a judge sentences a person to fifty years in prison, not only do they miss out on a lifetime, they miss out on opportunities they could have used. I feel this is unfair because a person is caged like an animal for so many years, they tend to start acting like one. This is being institutionalized. They won't know how to fend for themselves. So if they do get out, they won't know how to survive.

I feel like everybody deserves a second chance. It's a continuing cycle that's gonna keep going on forever. A person should not serve fifty years to think on what they did wrong if they can change their ways and take accountability.

-Gabriel, Sacramento, CA

Killed by The Police

March 7, 2012 my oldest brother was killed. He was killed by the NOPD (New Orleans Police Department).

Coming home from school March 7, 2012, my oldest brother and his friend was sitting outside. They were just chilling and talking. Once he saw my siblings and I get off school bus, he told us not to come outside until we finished our homework. I told him "OKAY" and we walked past him to the front door.

First thing I remember doing was going to my mother's bedroom to start my homework. As I was doing my homework I started to doze off in my mother's bed. Before I fell completely asleep I saw my brother and his friend go upstairs to my second oldest brother's room. I fell completely asleep after that.

I was awakened by what seemed to be thunder. BOOM!!! That sound was a battering ram. I hurried up and jumped out of the bed. My little siblings were in the back screaming and scared. BOOM!!! The second hit on the door made the door fly off the hinges. About twenty mean men came running through the downstairs of the house. They all were yelling at us. You could barely hear them. They were all yelling at the same time. A big man was standing in the door way of my mother's bedroom pointing a gun directly to my head. He yelled at my sister and me, screaming, "DON'T MOVE!" My heart was beating so fast at that moment. My mind was so lost. I thought I was going to die. I didn't move one bit, not one inch. As still as I was, I saw so many mean policemen run upstairs. Some were running back down and one went back up. I figured the moment he would reach the top of those stairs, he would pull the trigger. A shot fired. My heart sunk deep. I was so lost in my mind. All I heard were kids screaming and police yelling. I couldn't believe I had a gun pointed to my head. I couldn't believe so many mean police were in my home. And then a shot fired upstairs where my oldest brothers were.

They took us kids out to the brick wall of our house after the shot was fired. They made us sit on the cold ground, and told us to stay still. I was scared, so scared. I didn't know what was going to happen next. All I could've done was sit there and hear screaming. Tears started to fall, not knowing who got shot in my home. I started to realize that it had to be one of my brothers or my brother's friend because the police who pulled the trigger came outside of the house. Outside all I could see were police men and yellow tape around the sides and corners of the house. There were too many men out there. You couldn't even count them on your hands. Big white men, some black, but more white than black.

As we sat outside on that cold ground, they began to escort my brother's friend out the house into the police car. After that, they escorted my second oldest brother. One of his legs was broken, so they had to carry him down those stairs. On the way he had to walk past our oldest brother body. Our oldest brother was dying. As they carried my second oldest, all he could do was cry. He cried and screamed, "YALL KILLED MY BROTHER!" I heard him way from outside, he was coming downstairs. When I saw his face, my heart dropped. His eyes never left ours while he was being carried away. His face was wet and full of tears. His eyes were red and watery. All I could do was look at him and replay those words in my head until he got in the police car. No words could get out of my mouth. I was shocked to hear him say those words, "YOU KILLED MY BROTHER!". Even though I really didn't know what death meant, the word "killed" shot my heart. The sadness in his eyes made all of us cry harder. They were put in police cars and taken away from the scene.

My siblings and I were still sitting on the cold ground, hearing our brother die off. He was screaming for help. He suffered upstairs in our home. They did nothing at all. They probably could've saved our brother. He died upstairs in our home. They did nothing at all. They probably could've saved our brother. He died upstairs in our home. He left behind ten other siblings.

After five minutes or so, one police man took us away to a place we didn't know anything about. We drove to two places, one was the police station and the other place was a place where we were questioned. We were asked so many questions. We had to go in private rooms and talk

to people we didn't know. We all had to answer questions we didn't really know the answers to. They questioned us like we were adults or even teenagers. My sister was only 14 at the time. We told them how that police man took away our brother. I was scared in that place; all I wanted was my mother.

My mother found us around 1 or 2 in the morning. She was so sad; her face was full of tears. She hugged all of us and told us she loved us so much. Right away we left that place. She took us to our grandma's house. We slept there for about a month or so. Every night there, they would put us to bed and we'd hear sad music playing. That was my mother in the front room crying and singing those sad songs. Hearing her cry made me sad. I couldn't sleep at all for a few nights trying to make sense with what happened. I was young and didn't completely understand everything. I knew there was something wrong, but I didn't understand death completely.

Night after night my mother cried and asked the Lord, "WHY?" Day after day my mother wanted justice. All my family members came from out of every other town or city to help my mother get her justice. People we didn't even know wanted to help us. They marched and marched every day until night. That policeman killed my brother for no reason. He took our brother, my mother's first son away from us. He was well loved by his family. We wanted justice right, then, and there.

One day my mother decided to take all of us and march with her. We made posters saying, "JUSTICE FOR OUR BROTHER!" We marched, yelling, "NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE." We marched for hours in front of the City Hall building. We weren't the only people who wanted justice. They had hundreds of people out there. Some were helping our family out. Some wanted justice for all the BLACK LIVES lost to aggressive police officers. The news people were out there taking pictures. I was even put in the news report and a website page. I had my poster held up high, screaming for justice. Over and over those words repeated. I looked at my mother, she was crying and screaming. Everybody wanted some type of justice.

My mother got her justice. She wanted every bit of justice she could get. She wasn't stopping until we got it. She met the man who killed my brother in a conference meeting. He was asked questions. One question we all really wanted answers to was, "WHY?" He pulled the trigger and my brother had no weapon. Maybe he said he was scared. Scared of what? His color or how big he was? The man was taped on camera and he was found guilty. He answered all my mother's questions. He felt her pain, but didn't completely know the feeling. He told the truth and we got justice.

We got justice, but I didn't completely understand much of what had happened. I was young and only feeling lost. I was just doing what everybody else was doing. It messed me up trying to realize what death meant and to realize that I'll never have my brother again. It really messed me up when I realized at a certain age that I won't have any older brothers. I was mad at the police because my brother never had a chance to teach me some things. He couldn't teach me how to play any type of ball. I didn't have a father in my life, so I was expecting him to teach me something when I got older. I became angry with the policemen and the world. I became so disrespectful. I had no one to talk to, or I really didn't want to talk to anyone. Everybody would just feel sorry for me.

I didn't need anybody to feel sorry. I needed the help and nobody was there to help. I didn't want to talk to my mother about it because she was already hurting. I didn't get help so it messed with my mind; it changed me from the good child to the bad.

Time has made a change in me. I am now 16 years of age. Coping with the death of other family members, and friends has helped me deal with my situation. I am surprised at how I can control my emotions when the thought comes to mind. I don't get too scared when my eyes close and when I hear that shot and my brother crying for help in my sleep, it really doesn't bother me anymore. I am understanding death day by day. Everybody has to die one day and we don't know when and how we are going to die. I did get help. I am not so disrespectful anymore. I'm not mad with the world anymore, but I am still terrified of any and all police.

-Tyrone, New Orleans, Louisiana

I was young and didn't completely understand everything. I knew there was something wrong, but I didn't understand death completely.

SECOND CHANCE ESSAYS

Practicing Gratitude

Why give someone a second chance, or many chances? "Many people have never been given a second chance" other people may say. But everybody gets many chances in life by getting to live every day. I've been given chances that I didn't know I was getting until I realized that I get chances every day by getting to wake up every day. I've been incarcerated for about one year and nine months.

It seems as time went by quick. A year and nine months ago was my sister's graduation. She was graduating from elementary school. I never made it because that day I was incarcerated. I was involved in a gang, which is a worldwide gang. I remember going out with the "homies" riding around the "hood" looking for trouble, and coming back home around two or three in the morning. Many people may think that gangs are the answer to their problems, but it never is because being in gangs could cause your family more harm. It leads to death, incarceration, or it can leave you scarred for life.

I was incarcerated when I was fifteen, now I'm seventeen. I've realized so many things that I could have done differently. I could have spent more time with my brothers/sister, mom and dad. Now that I think about it, I should have valued what I had when I was out.

Since being here in juvenile hall, I've had many family members pass away and I can't do anything about it. Many of you who read this may relate to what I say, and many of you won't. Many of us are getting a second chance to be free, and I hope you make it better than the way you lived before. A lot of us want to make our parents proud, and a lot of other people want to make themselves proud. No matter what your circumstances are, you will have a second chance and take that as an advantage to do your best. We have to be grateful for what we have because others are in worse circumstances than we are. Although I believe everyone deserves a second chance, there are some people who mess up that second chance because they don't realize that they're running out of chances.

I hope that you related to this because most of us could relate, because we all went through the same situations. Most of our families have no jobs, money, clothes, food, so we believe that we need to provide for our families. Most people would look for jobs, but the majority of youth will burglarize and sell drugs just to provide for their families. Many will get second or many chances and ruin it.

Nobody realized what they're doing wrong until they get locked up for a long time. This is the way I learned that the actions I was doing was wrong. I'm most likely headed to YA for about four to six years, which would be six to eight years locked up. I am grateful because I got a second chance to go home and do things differently. Everyone should practice gratitude. Many people won't be going home, so we should be thankful - thankful that we got a second chance.

-Andy, Sacramento, CA

I love my mom and my sister – they're everything I could ever ask for.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the choice to let go of anger and resentment toward yourself or someone else. It is a decision to surrender any thought of revenge and to move forward with your personal power in tact. There're two sides of forgiveness: to forgive someone, and to ask for forgiveness. Both sides of forgiveness can be hard if you have poor communication skills, or if you're afraid of the answer you'll receive. To forgive someone can take time – minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, or even years.

There are some negatives to forgiveness: one is that after you did something wrong, you feel burdened, stressed, maybe angry or depressed. One positive is that you'll have a good bond/relationship or have a good feeling.

For example, I'm eighteen years old, and my dad hasn't been in my life. I seen him maybe three to four times growing up. Maybe I seen him more when I was little because I had pictures with him, but I don't remember any of those memories. Growing up without a dad has been really hard on me, not having anyone to look up to, wishing I can have a hero in my life, but no, I wasn't one of those kids. I had to grow up the hard way.

I love my mom and my sister – they're everything I could ever ask for. They been there for me when I felt like I didn't have anybody, and they been there through the good and the bad. It was kind of hard growing up, because of no father figure and not having any grown-man talks and sharing our interest or things we don't like.

After crying so much, I wish I can have a perfect family and a dad. I had to forgive him. I had to take responsibility for my actions and not blame him for why he wasn't in my life. I had to mature and humble myself, and be thankful for things I do have in my life. I have a funny family, a smart and educated mother, a beautiful sister that's funny and that's doing good for herself. After I forgave him, I felt a lot better about myself, and that he's missing out in my life. I have goals, I know where I want to be.

To forgive is to give up resentment, to grant relief from payment or to grant forgiveness. Forgiveness is the act of forgiving. Forgiveness is willing or able to forgive, allowing room for error or weakness. A lot of people come to God for help or when they're in a situation they want to get out of. I've made mistakes before, everyone is not perfect and I have sinned, so I ask God for forgiveness. Forgiveness means to me that you surrender any thought or revenge or negative act towards someone that hurt you in a negative way or act. Forgiving someone is beneficial because you understand who they are and you gotta love them for who they are if they don't want to change. Forgiving someone can be hard because you can be afraid once you forgive them that they'll hurt you again. That's why you got to keep your guards up and love from a distance. Just 'cause you forgive someone, doesn't mean you have to be with or around that person. You can go separate ways if you choose to. Forgiving a person can be good because you lose the thought of revenge or grudges and it may change the other person's perspective who hurt you.

My last and final example of forgiveness: I have an uncle that's in his twenties and lives with his parents. I was living with my granny and grandpa for the school year, at Franklin High School, and at my granny's house I have my PS2 over there that I be playing, and that came up missing. Other things at mom's got stolen too, but things can be replaced, not people, so I had to forgive him even though I was mad at the time, and he was family. It hurt me but then I found out that he was on drugs and he was just selling my things to get high. Once I found out he was on drugs, it made me forgive him even more because I know how hard it is to get off a drug. A few members of my family use drugs. I know my uncle wouldn't steal from me if he was clean.

-Evonté, Sacramento, CA



Adult Honorable Mention

SECOND CHANCE ESSAYS

What Second Chance?

All my life I heard about second chances. "This person has a second chance at life...that person earned a second chance to prove their worth...The other person gets a chance to change the world..." I am heartened by the idea of a second chance and pray it is not squandered.

However, I have never been given a second chance at anything. What I mean by that is every time I have had a chance to do a thing like work a dream job or present great work, I usually miss the shot, and can never try again. I was engaged to be married twice in my life and had no second chance either time. Technically, one could call my second engagement a second chance at marriage, but it's not the same if it is not with the same person, but I digress. I missed an opportunity to enroll in DeVry and earn a Bachelor's Degree in Game and Simulation Programming. I missed a chance to see the pyramids in Egypt. Now I'm in San Quentin, hoping and praying to get a second chance at freedom. Although I am an eternal optimist, my record with second chances is all losses.

In my own life, I've given many people second, third, fourth, and fifth chances because I believe that humanity can only thrive if we work together. I believe that communities need to be whole in order to be as effective as possible in this world. I believe in the mercy of the second chance. That mercy comes to me from the Most High, as I am given another chance every day when I wake up. I realize that no one is promised tomorrow, so when the question is asked about how I spent my last day I want to say that I woke up and gave someone a second chance. I give multiple chances unless it is no longer practical to my survival, but I pray for my enemies as if they are family. It is my only wish that all of humanity prospers, and that we all prosper together.

During my twelve years incarcerated, I have seen, heard, and read about thwarted second chances. A good friend of mine went to the parole board after twenty-four years inside, got found suitable, then had his date taken the day before he was due to come home. He made all sorts of arrangements, his family had all these plans, and the governor took his date at the eleventh hour with no reasoning given. My friend was devastated and me along with him, but he took some time to come to grips, and presses on today, still helping, still working for good. A few people who empathized with his crushing defeat wondered why he did not go plum spinning off the axle. He said that this was a chance to give the justice system another chance to release him, and that it gave

him another chance to examine his life.

Those ideas intrigued me in a real way. Instead of protesting or doing anything negative, he forgave the denial and offered a second chance. I had to sit with that for awhile, wondering if I had the strength of character to feel that way after losing freedom at the last possible instant. Truth be told, I don't know if I could, but I know I would try. That kind of positivity and hope should be fostered and increased so it can spread to the rounded corners of the Earth. That kind of positive energy can change the world.

So as I sit here, hoping and praying for a second chance at life, through a request of commutation of sentence, I can write about having hope in the second chance. I would like a second chance to make things right with the victims of crimes everywhere. I would like a second chance to get married and have children. I would like a second chance to be a teacher. During my time inside, I have had another chance to delve into my childhood trauma and drama, from bullying in school to severe discipline. I have had another chance to examine my ideas and motives to figure out why I committed the crimes I've done. I have had another chance to sit in the fire of my poor decisions and connect them to my personal aims and goals, both of which were shaped by my upbringing and interaction with humanity. I have had another chance to use my creativity to study my emotions and triggers and turn something harmful into something good. In a way, prison has helped me to become a better person, but that is only because of the time to reflect, time I could have taken at any time, without the burden of incarceration and its vicissitudes. Prison is not a rite of passage. All it takes is a real desire to make your life better. Don't get my wrong, I know people who are living the dream of the second chance and I am so happy for them, but the reality is that those few are few indeed, for these plantations must stay full. America has assassinated presidents to keep slavery in tact. Slavery is now called mass incarceration, just as colored people are now called people of color.

Be that as it may, all people should be given at least a second chance. If humanity is to improve and unite, mercy and forgiveness must be in the mix. I have to work on this as well. Since living in the past keeps enemies, perhaps I will give mine another chance. If there is only today, then the only real hope is for a better tomorrow because tomorrow is a second chance at today.

-George "Mesro" Coles-El, San Quentin State Prison,
San Quentin, CA

I have had another chance to use my creativity to study my emotions and triggers and turn something harmful into something good.

"Untitled" by Ebony Jones



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SECOND CHANCE ESSAYS

Adult Honorable Mention

Epiphany

Most of us in prison have looked back on our lives. Some with regret, some with sadness, some with anger. In looking back on your own life, have you ever come across one point in time, one thing or another, one action you did, or turn you made, even one fleeting second where you realize, "that was it"? That is where everything changed, nothing was ever the same after that. You had an epiphany where you come to the realization that the decision you made at that moment changed the path you were on for better; or most times, for worse. Happiness or ruin, everything good or bad, came down to that one incident.

There was a time in my life when the money flowed like a crisp mountain spring. A spring that fed a creek, that fed a river, that led to the horizon, and beyond. A mighty river that showed no sign of slowing down. The expensive toys that I accumulated turned my garage into a giant toy box full of forgotten and unused toys. Left only to become a status symbol, a veneer of a personality that continued to expand with even bigger and more expensive toys. RVs the size of a Peterbilt, several hydraulic low riders, a 1932 Roadster; my adult-sized go-cart, and a gold chain the size of an anchor holding down a party boat. Surrounded by people of renown, I sipped on Louis the 13th Cognac, or Jefferson's Presidential Bourbon.

There were other mandates to the maintenance of my lifestyle. The emotional adjusting to unconquerable, the disregard for life while seeking financial gain, and the assumed duty of being the person responsible to provide, and being a drug dealer produced financial stability in support of these emotional accolades.

Then one day I became a father. I wasn't changed by this. In my arrogance, I was not worried at all. How hard could it be to do? I knew that I could fill up a room with baby formula and diapers. What else do babies need? Still, for a moment, just a fleeting breath, I pondered... was this a blessing, or a curse? Looking back, did I even realize or know the difference? No. I continued to attend to my reckless behavior.

I passed out money as if I was a patron of a strip club looking to impress and persuade the emotions of those in need and control the ones I felt needed to be "subdued", exhibiting what I thought was the coolness of a villain.

Then quite suddenly, something my arrogance had hidden from me, a possibility never encountered upon. Everything I held in such high esteem, and the lifestyle that went with it, came to a crashing halt. I lost everything I held dear to an irresponsible, consent-violating act of ignorance.

My life as I had known it was over, replaced by a new life. A

different sort of living, but with similar attributes and priorities. Prison; had I exchanged one illusion for another? I had exchanged a lead and starring role in a neighborhood scene, for a walk-on role in a cage behind an electric barbed-wire fence. This part was unacceptable.

I needed to be the star again, not some bit-part. I took control of this new illusion.

There was still money, drugs, cellphones, fair weather friends and associates. Things that boasted of my previous life outside beyond the walls, fences and gun towers. But there was something missing in this land of towers and fences. Something left behind and forgotten. Yes, there was something missing, but what could it be; certain qualities of freedom to be sure, as well different levels of intimacy of course. So I recalibrated a new process of attending to the executive of my personality.

Just as all the other things that I had held so dear in my previous life, these new things behind these walls were just as fleeting, just as temporary, just as worthless. Still, I had the illusion of control over them, and the people around me, through these worthless items of imagined value. The stupidity of this vision was lost on the necessity to hold up the lies in order to make up for all that I really lacked in life, and in society.

It was December 14th, 2010 when a Correctional Officer stopped at my cell door and handed me a letter. It was a letter from Xavierre Allen Jr., my son.

From under that blanked of despair, an emotional wave of excitement rushed over me. It was like a breath of fresh air to my soul, and from the black and white grayness of my life, color returned to my vision. My son, the only real, unimagined, permanent forever thing in my life had grown up and written me a letter. With shaking hands, I opened, and began to read this gift from beyond the walls.

My vision began to blur, and suddenly I had to remember to breathe, and through tears I read just after the greeting my son wrote - "dad, if you loved me so much, why didn't you stop what you were doing when I was born?" I fell back and collapsed on the bed awed and confused. There it was...I had hit the bottom, brought there by a lifetime of regret, and the love of a little boy, and his confusion of his vision of his father.

It was a good question. Why had the birth of my son not changed me forever? Was my son not important? Was he important now? Did I miss him? Did I even know him? Why could I not even remember his face? What a fool I had been.

-Xavierre Allen, Valley State Prison, Chowchilla, CA

I could not imagine not giving others a second chance.

Time of Change

Second chances should be a mandatory part of everyone's lives. As a kid I loved to write and it was my favorite subject in school. Truly, now my writing has changed me into a truthful, grateful, person some fifty years later. In prison being transgendered, my writing has helped so many transgenderers to see the beauty in their freedom. Being able to celebrate who you are everyday is something I embrace everyday.

Life experiences that I have faced have given me a second chance to say it's okay to be who you are, even in a men's prison. I believe that we all have something to say, but some can't because they are silenced by fear. As someone who has dealt with bullies all of my life, instead of running away I'd put my words in paper about how I feel. I have found that my words have made me a better person and hopefully those who have read my stories have found comfort and strength. My writing has given me a second chance because I can be my authentic self and not allow others to put any negative thoughts in my head. Writing tells the character of my soul.

I always wish to give everyone a positive message even if I have not been accepted by someone. It doesn't mean that I have to act out and be spiteful to them. It means that I have to give everyone a second chance because that is the right thing to do. I don't want to leave this world being bitter because others can't accept me for me. So each day, even

in prison, I'd rather be the person who is structured and continues to grow and show all how to treat me. Doesn't mean that I always succeed every time, but what it does say is I am not a failure because I have made an attempt.

I could not imagine not giving others a second chance. People do make honest mistakes all the time, we have to know forgiveness in our hearts and not allow ourselves to follow the paths of destructive people. Keeping in mind that when we give others a second chance, it does show we too can change. There was a time in my life that I felt I didn't matter to others so I couldn't reach out to anyone with any kind words. But writing has given me a voice to be heard and shown me that my life matters just as much as the next person.

I have devoted my life to the last six years just about telling the stories of those who might be forgotten on their triumphs they've overcome to be better. The world depends on us all to somehow find a better way so we can all be equal. I feel this can be done just by listening to each other and celebrating just how much we all have in common.

Let us begin today with conversation, second changes, and to remember that everyone dies but not everyone lives. Let us all live on this earth in harmony and not fight. We can all be better if we try a little harder each day.

-Lisa Strawn, San Quentin State Prison, San Quentin, CA

A Second Chance to Make A Difference

Sitting in prison for nine years has given me a lot of time to reflect on my life. I often find myself returning to the way things unfolded. Why this, why that...more times than not, I want to be given a second chance, a do-over.

My story begins in Southern California, a small town forty miles East of Los Angeles. My parents, both Mexican-American, were blue-collar workers who worked hard to put a roof over our heads and put food on the table. The life my parents modeled for my brothers and I was reflective of the life they grew up in. Work hard, pay your bills, respect others, and be grateful for what you have.

By the time I started high school, I became a master at hiding the real me. I was able to convince myself that my peers would disown me if they knew the real me. I asked girls to school dances, attended several Proms and even dated a few girls, hoping that I could be like the rest of the guys. Nothing worked. At the end of the day, I would retreat to my bedroom, look at myself in the mirror and still see a lost boy, seeking acceptance.

After graduating high school, I enrolled in college and continued pursuing my goals in life. Along my journey, I met some amazing individuals and I started attending a non-denominational Christian Church. My involvement and willingness to learn took off over night. It seemed like the more and more I learned about my faith, the more and more I became accepting of who I was.

In 2003, I was enrolled in grad school, working full time and life was good. My best friend at the time was Joe who I had met at church. Joe was living in Orange County, as he was as college student. Joe and I had an amazing friendship. We spend a lot of time together at church, going to ball games, movies and traveling across country. Every opportunity we could find in our schedules, Joe and I managed to spend time together living life to the fullest.

It was Springtime, just as the seasons change, so did my heart. I finally found the courage to tell Joe about the real me. When everything was all said and done, I felt great, almost as if I removed a ton off my shoulders. I felt free, I was no longer hiding the person I was. The best part is that Joe embraced me for who I was. Joe didn't judge me, he didn't make fun of me, he simple accepted me and told me that he supported me for who I was.

Soon after, Joe and I were hanging out and it happened. Just like that, Joe and I began dating each other. Yeah, over the years, I experienced a handful of experiences with other guys, but being with Joe was different. Joe became my boyfriend, my partner, my best friend. We complimented each other very well; inspiring each other to go after all our goals.

I must admit that dating Joe was the missing link I needed in my life. As happy as I was, I realized it was time to share "us" with our respective families. It was already obvious how close we were. Where ever I was, Joe was right by my side. I discussed this issue with Joe and I quickly learned that he and I were not on the same page. Joe was not ready to share our relationship with his family because he was afraid his religious Mom would not accept us. As hard as it was, I decided to respect Joe's decision and we continued to keep our relationship private.

Joe's Mom, Sherry and I had a great relationship. I was very close to Sherry, she and I often went to dinner together. On two separate occasions, I asked Sherry what she thought if I said I was gay? Sherry was always quick to say that I was not gay and I needed to wait for the right woman to come into my life. Little did she know that a man was already in my life, and it was her son! I looked up to Sherry as a second mother, it was hard not being able to share that part of my life with her.

A few years later, Joe and I went our separate ways and we never shared our relationship to our loved ones... well, not until the courtroom. Joe and I had a major financial dispute that severed our friendship. When I took the stand, Joe and the DA made me out to be a liar. A jury of my peers found me guilty and here I sit in prison, a place all so familiar to my brothers. Would've, could've, should've, but only if I did, I'll never know.

Instead of being angry, I had to come to grip with my new reality. First of all, I had to forgive Joe for the financial mess that triggered our problems.

In prison, I feel as though I've been given a second chance. Whether I'm mentoring, tutoring, or being a listening ear, I want to be that friend I didn't have when I needed one. More times than not, I've been overwhelmed by the acceptance I've received in such a dark place.

-Richard "Chooch" Angulo, Avenal State Prison, Avenal, CA



"Untitled" by Gabriel López

I felt free,
I was no
longer
hiding the
person I
was.

SF 12/27/24
Gabriel Lopez
Anna
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SECOND CHANCE ESSAYS

Adult Honorable Mention

I experienced situations where I was trying to help my so-called friend and wound up cutting my freedom short once again. I realized that my loyalty ran too deep for people and they didn't deserve my company.



"Muslim Woman" by Patrick Bayona

Fresh Starts

In February 2011 I went to jail for assaulting a man at the group home I was placed in. My mom and I had planned so much before I became incarcerated so to her it was yet another monumental disappointment. I had been taken out my home initially because of the toxic relationship I had with my parents. I had disobeyed her numerous times and she had every reason to leave me in detention. I knew that jail wasn't the place for me. I was taught better than to get myself into situations where I was locked down with murderers, drug dealers, and rapists. But even still, my mother stood by me even after all the angry phone calls, disrespect and stress I caused.

I continued getting into trouble in the detention center. The kids called it a "turn up" which was a jail term for tantrum. Sometimes just lining up would ignite an argument. I admit that I was extremely frustrated and depressed and turning up, breaking property, hitting staff and residents was my outlet, but it mostly resulted in me getting hurt during restraints and ultimately having my time in jail extended. I caught almost eleven extra charges and started even more arguments with my mother. As a result, I didn't get released until December 2016—almost six years later. When I came home, my mother was like a humpback whale and her offspring after migration, welcoming and resourceful. I wanted to be a child again so I could spend more time with her.

The taste of being wanted was like drinking a pink lemonade with crushed ice on a humid day. Her attitude was refreshing after all the trials I had faced—literally. Nothing had gone the way I wanted it to and after the dust settled, I just wanted my mom and I to have a good relationship again.

But after not having freedom for so long, I felt like I needed to do things that other seventeen year olds were doing like hanging out with friends, having boyfriends, and getting jobs. I wanted to feel grown. I wanted to be the ruler of myself for a change.

I left home in hopes to find friends and to feel like I was part of the community again, but instead, I found the complete opposite. For a year and a half I was living quite frivolously with no objective in life feeling like I didn't have anyone on my side left. I went nights not knowing where I would lay my head. I was robbed and had to roam the streets of New York late night, hoping someone would help me without requiring me to give them money or sex. I went nights, sometimes even days, not having anything to eat just because saying, "sorry," wasn't worth the humility. I experienced situations where I was trying to help my so-called friend and wound up cutting my freedom short once again. I realized that my loyalty ran too deep for people and they didn't deserve my company.

I had too much pride to go back to my mother after all the stuff I'd done to her. She had the choice to hold a grudge if she wanted because of all the all of the disrespect and stress I put her through in the last seven years of my life. Yet, she still decides to forgive me because she knows I'm human and am going to make mistakes. Being that she hasn't given up on me I feel like I'm more responsible with my actions. I've been applying for jobs and have learned to compromise and communicate with her. We don't get into as many arguments and we have open-minded conversations where we meet on common grounds.

I had been selfish because I didn't think about what was making my mom happy nor what my mom and I were going to do in the long run. My mother forgiving me benefits her too because we don't argue anymore and I try not to stress her with problems. I'm trying to do better for myself and for the rest of my family. I've enrolled in GED classes and have been working on my goals of becoming a published writer. Since my mother forgave me, I've been able to spend more time with my family and now have a better relationship with my beautiful little sister Nazareth. This exemplifies how being open to forgive others benefits everyone involved.

So why should we be willing to forgive others? Because no one on this earth is perfect. Sometimes daily encounters with family, friends, or even people on the street make us feel like being that people have free will they have control on their actions- which they do, but some people just get side tracked or distracted. Forgiveness is a way to give people a fresh start and a clean slate.

-Brianna Ramirez, New York City, New York

A Moment Alone with Steve

The hard wood of the bench is uncomfortable. It feels unforgiving beneath my butt as I sit there, slouched forward so that my lower back is pressed against the gray, cement wall. On either side of me, my palms are flat on the seat, while my fingers are curled over its edge, gripping it not too tightly. Affixed to the wall above me there is a metal box with a metal cord attached to a large, plastic receiver. A phone. A sad, sad reminder to me of my brother Steve. I feel like I let him down.

323 – 335... As if by instinct, I start to recite Steve's cell phone number in my mind, the first (and for a long time only) number I had memorized when I came to prison almost four years ago. But I stop. It's too much. The desperate urge to reach up and dial, to feel the familiar bit of anxiety I do while the phone rings and I'm waiting for Steven to answer; the equally desperate urge if only to "Say (my) name after the tone" so at least he knows I tried. I can't take it. Any of it. My dear older brother Steve is dead now, and the number I remember isn't his any more. It's no one's. No one will answer. My stomach in knots.

Suddenly my fingers' hold of the wooden bench tightens, my throat constricts and I can hardly breathe. I want to cry, but I don't. Maybe I just can't. Just as I have gripped the bench beneath me, shame has gripped me awfully tight at my core. I sit there, sad, lonely without my brother, and thoughts of him and me consume me, and for a while, I hang my head, wallowing there in regret that I wasn't better – much, much better – to Steve, my brother.

He called me every day when I was home. At some point in my 50 years, though, I had become extremely self-absorbed, and didn't appreciate those calls. Looking back, I'm not exactly sure how I got that way. Drinking and smoking PCP into my 40s didn't help, I'm sure. Neither did my reckless insistence on sleeping primarily with married men because I feared commitment and heartbreak. Maybe growing up gay in a super-macho, gang infested neighborhood, feeling outcast, or the feeling of abandonment I experienced early on when my parents divorced, took a lasting toll on me. I don't know. The only certainty I have about it today is that I'm sickened and ashamed of how I treated those calls from Steve, like they weren't important.

The phone would ring, I remember. Without fail, I'd recognize my brother's number on the caller I.D., and I'd answer. My eyes would roll as I brought the phone to my ear, usually not in the mood to talk about nothing. I really didn't like talking on the phone as it was, and Steve, after checking on my well-being, mostly just wanted to gossip.

I'd feel annoyed, like my precious time was being wasted. So once enough time passed (a couple of minutes or so) that it didn't feel rude, I'd make up some excuse to hang up. I'd say that I was cooking, that I was dealing with someone else on the other line, or otherwise too busy to talk. When actually, I was most likely in a rush to get back to "The Young and the (Goddamned) Restless."

Steve bought me a cell phone once. I didn't want it. I told him I didn't want it, but he insisted. He argued at length that it would be good to have in case of an emergency, that he worries and should always be able to reach me, that the line was free on his plan anyway, and so on. So, I relented and accepted Steve's phone.

I rarely used it to call anybody for any reason. The longer I had it, in fact, the more I wondered why I kept it. It was all but worthless to me, junk of as much value as a hat to a pig. For I didn't appreciate then that Steve hadn't simply given me a cell phone. With it, he was

trying to tell me that he would always be there for me, never more than a phone call away, and that he loved me. He cared for me.

Sadly, though, I maintained my selfish ignorance of Steve's amazing message until I came to prison. I was fifty-six years old, already an old man by many accounts, facing a decade behind bars. In the blink of an eye, it seemed, I was gone from my simple, quiet life of soap operas and Ninety-Nine Cent stores, and thrust instead into a living nightmare. By far, this was the scariest experience of my entire life. Not once before had I feared being beaten or stabbed or raped, like I did now. I also feared that, at my age, ten years could be a life sentence, that I was doomed one way or another to die in prison. My bunk felt more to me like a coffin than a bed. And when I lay down at night, my mind and heart each raced wildly, and I was startled by how hopelessly alone I felt.

323 – 335... The first time I dialed Steve's number – merely days in – my fingers shook terribly with nerves. Thankfully, he answered right away.

"Hi, Steve," I tried to sound normal. I tried not to cry.

"Angel," he stated, his rough voice sounding beautiful to me, like music to a deaf man who can miraculously hear again. "Are you okay?"

I lost it. I broke down and wept, openly and hysterically, every tear, every drop, every ugly line of snot its own painful account of fear, shame, regret, and loneliness. My big brother, knowing the wretched throes of incarceration himself, stayed on the line to hear them all. And so I began to understand the tremendous value of even a quick phone call.

That day Steve protected me from feeling alone and forgotten. His great love continued to protect me in that way, in fact, twice a week for the next two years. Then he lost his long, arduous battle with Hepatitis. He died. Gone. Just like that.

It strikes me now that Steve never heard me say I'm sorry – for cutting him so short in the past; for not appreciating him like he absolutely deserved; for failing to protect him like he protected me; for often ignoring (at times even denying) what I meant to him, and what he meant to me.

Neither did Steve ever hear me say that I get it, which I do. I finally get it that we always needed each other. Now that he's gone, of course. Now that I don't have the phone he bought for me to keep close to him. Now that I'm stuck with words I'll never get to say to him, but I desperately wish I could. Words like "I'm sorry." Like "I love you" and "Thank you for everything." Words like "Good-bye, Steve. I'll miss you," and "You were always wonderful brother to me" Yes, I finally get it, now that it's too late.

I lift up my head. Tears wet my face. My fingers loosen their grip of the bench, and I am aware again of the uncomfortable sensation in my seat. As I stand now, I breathe in deeply, cooling my lungs. A certain calm washes over me. For a quick moment I struggle to remember why I sat here under this phone in the first place, but I shrug the mystery off. Right now, I'd rather think about Steve. His gorgeous, smiling face, and those words I'm stuck with, all settle in to rest in my heart where I keep them for now, where they will stay until I see my Big Brother again. I'm in no rush, of course. Just hopeful that when my time does come, I'll get to see Steve again. I'll get to say everything I should have said before, and make things right with him. I'm hopeful that I'll get to finally be the happy, loving grateful little brother in eternity he always deserved from me down here on Earth.

-Angel Delara, Avenal State Prison, Avenal, CA

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SECOND CHANCE ESSAYS

Adult Honorable Mention

Second Chance

There have been many situations in my life I have thought about doing differently or wanted a second chance at. I used to fixate about how I did all the things while locked up, that I should've done when I was in school. In the cells I worked out, read and studied, wrote and communicated honestly with my loved ones. If I chose to do the same during my school years, I could've had college as an option and stronger relationships.

Over time we all learn, hindsight is 20/20 but I've come to understand that if you want a second chance you got to work at it. When I got sentenced to life without parole there was no second chance for me. My appeal had no action. So initially when I hit the pen there was no incentive to behave. Once I got a TV sent, I forced myself not to get two write-ups so I wouldn't lose my property behind C-status. If I had put any true consideration as to what was at stake when I was playing the streets, I'd know what could be lost beyond some property.

I figured out how to avoid situations that will jeopardize what I have, that's my family, my health, and my future.

In 2013 I was given the chance to go to a level 3 (prison), which was brand new to me. In 2015 I saw a lifer go home for the first time with my own eyes. I never imagined that happening. The only way that I knew lifers got out was in a box. I figured it would be a cardboard box because pine would cost the state too much. In 2017 I got transferred to a level 2 (prison). This was another adjustment I wasn't prepared for, but I had to accept.

I tell myself that the state is going to let me out one of these days. With the thought of maybe getting out one day, especially how laws have been changing lately, I figured if anyone is willing to bet on me, it better be me. I don't believe in luck, it's preparation and opportunity. I want to go home. I want to show my appreciation to my friends and family who never gave up on me. I want to show the world I'm worth something. I want to be of service to the community that I not only neglected but disrespected. I want to do all of this with my second chance. I want to be of value to society beyond being job security for a CO (correctional officer).

The truth is I was a disillusioned youth who wanted to play the streets without any type of understanding. I now know it's my duty to enlighten those who I see on the same dark path as me. To have a positive impact on someone's choices might keep them from needing a second chance.

As for all of us who are in need of that elusive second chance, we can not take any short cuts or do anything halfway. Those are what got us locked up. Just knowing the change I put myself through by taking things seriously instead of taking things for granted there is potential I ignored when I was younger. I'm no longer that selfish inconsiderate kid who thought he knew everything. If there is anything worth having, it's worth working for and if there's anything worth keeping it should be worth giving away.

-R.Q. Feeney, Avenal State Prison in Avenal, CA.

Life is Valuable

Life is valuable, every day, every week, every month and every year. Life is full of opportunities and with the right opportunities you have the choice to pass or take them. And choices like these are entirely up to you.

What about second chances are those up to you?

Sometimes second chances, one more tries are there; but are they entirely up to you?

Not always you want that second chance. It's either you get it or you don't.

How about when you come across an opportunity to give another person a second chance?

This is a choice that's entirely up to you. Now, do you immediately give this person a second chance or do you question yourself?

For instance, does it matter who this person is whether it be your mom, dad, brother, sister, spouse or any family member? What about a complete stranger. Would you give them a second chance?

Now that we may know who this person is. Does it matter what they did?

What about the stranger does he/she get a second chance?

Being a recovering addict of criminality!
Taking to heart the true meaning of empathy.

I wonder how my mother would be if I was killed over senseless gang violence. If music was made to glamorize the death of me. The shooter was given a 15 to life sentence for murder. What does this mean?

That after he serves 15 years he is eligible for a second chance back into society. Could my mother give this man a second chance? Does she even agree with him having a second chance?

A complete stranger that became a part of my mother's life...For murdering her son!

That's my example of empathy. My harsh reality! Now what if I told you that this complete stranger who robbed my mother of her son's life was actually me!

My mother who lost her son, was the mother who of a young man whom I robbed his life of, over gang violence.

Being eligible for parole and a second chance to be with my family! After serving 15 years of a life sentence would this young man's mother give me a second chance? Does she agree with me getting a second chance living back into society?

After all the pain, all the tears, funeral cost and ruining Christmas for the rest of her and her family and friends' lives. Do I deserve a second chance at life?

Still serving this life sentence I can't give this answer because it's not mine to give.

One thing this has given me. A gnawing feeling of anxiety for past wrongs; guilt = the definition of remorse. Putting myself in one's shoes = empathy asking for forgiveness from God and receiving a spiritual awakening.

I've learned in order to be forgiven I have to forgive myself and others who have harmed or wronged me. Why I believe what's been done to me won't amount to what wrong I've done to this young man's mother, by robbing her son of his life.

Now just because I can forgive doesn't mean I'm forgiving or deserve that second chance. It lets me know that living the way I did I know have a chance of heart, change of mind and change of direction.

I may never be forgiven or given that opportunity of a second chance. But I did take the opportunity and that second chance for self to become better than what I used to be.

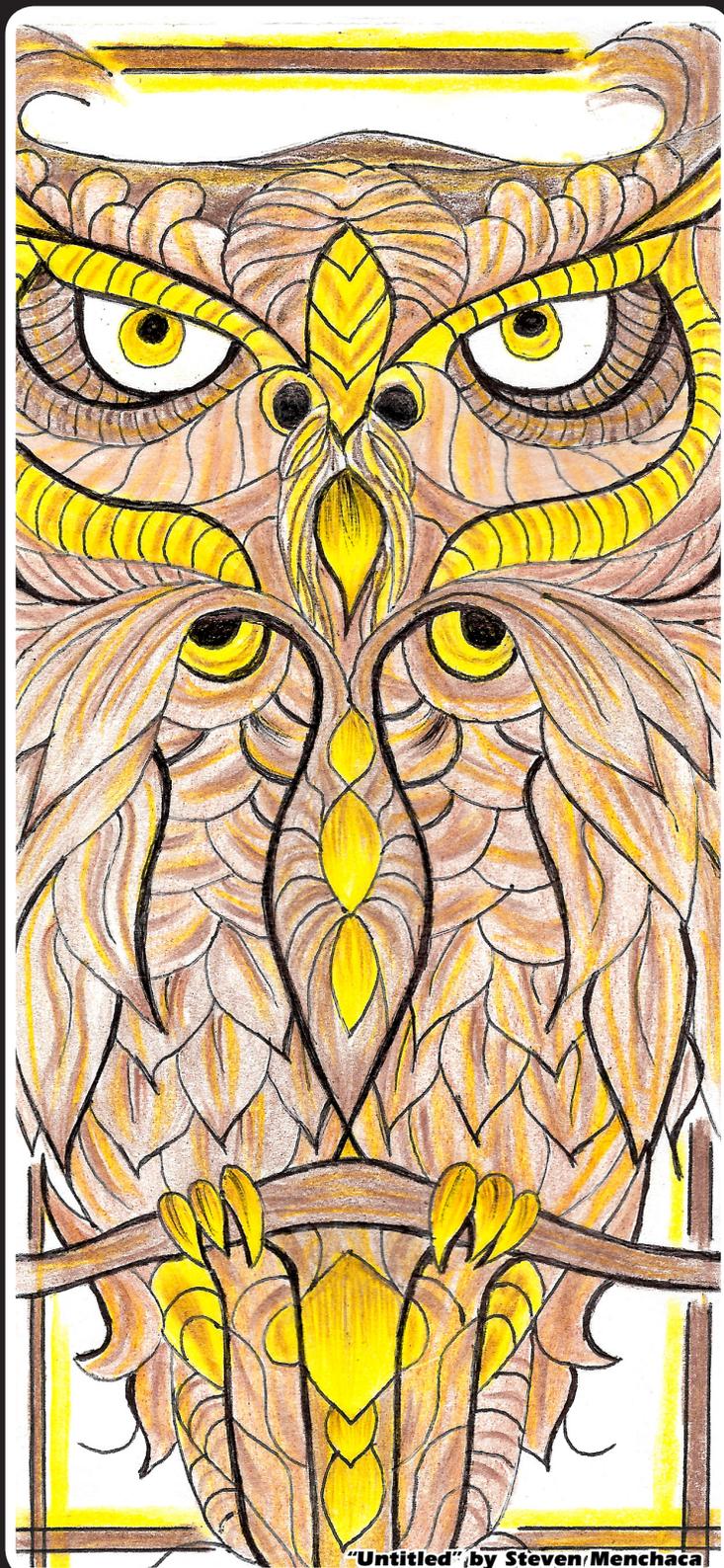
-Alexis A. Pamiroyan, Pleasant Valley State Prison, Coalinga, CA



"TBW" by Unknown

MANY THANKS TO OUR CONTEST JUDGES!

I now know it's my duty to enlighten those who I see on the same dark path as me.



Contest Judges:

- 1) Richard Watson – retired Superintendent of Solano County Juvenile Detention Facility
- 2) John Esterle – The Whitman Institute, Executive Director
- 3) Viola Mejia – San Francisco County Jail teacher and youth advocate
- 4) Katherine Ellison – Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting
- 5) Michael Kroll – writer, Beat teacher and activist
- 6) Jamie Davis – Sacramento County Probation Department
- 7) Vanessa Nieman – New Orleans Musician and activist
- 8) Kurt Stemmler – Chubb, Senior Vice President, San Francisco
- 9) Monifa Akousa – Ella Baker Center for Human Rights Organizer & Advocate
- 10) Sheila Jordan – Alameda County's Superintendent of Schools Emerita, teacher
- 11) Kevin Gentry – Longtime Beat Writer, Contributor, and Passionate Advocate to Assist Youth in Reaching their Greatest Potential
- 12) Leslie Lapidès – Juvenile Justice Information Exchange, Managing Editor
- 13) Omar Turcios – former Beat writer, writer, editor
- 14) Missy Hart – former Beat writer, activist, writer, spoken word artist, UCSC student
- 15) Xochi Birch – computer programmer and entrepreneur
- 16) Allison Nugent – Beat teacher, activist
- 17) Lydia Walls – former Beat writer, teacher, activist
- 18) Mervyn Wool – former Beat writer, writer, Operations Manager Expeditors
- 19) Emily Souder – Beat teacher, editor
- 20) Ali Moss – Teacher, activist, hair stylist
- 21) Marty Nicolaus – Author, activist

I may never be forgiven or given that opportunity of a second chance. But I did take the opportunity and that second chance for self to become better than what I used to be.

Mistakes should be a positive experience, not a negative one. You learn from your mistakes to not make them again. Your mistake is a gift, not a weight. Everyone deserves a second chance, a chance to learn. As a community, we need to support each other and help each other through hard times... Our mistakes are our learning tools.

read the rest of Suada's Second Chance Essay on page 52

