VOICE

VOICES OF THE INCARCERATED
WITH CREATIVE EXPRESSION
NOW THAT THE SILENCE HAS BEEN BROKEN,

HERE COMES THE V.O.I.C.E.
V.O.I.C.E.
VOICES OF THE INCARCERATED WITH CREATIVE EXPRESSION

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This watch means the world to me
a symbol of how precious time can be
to some, it’s just a piece of jewelry
This beautiful watch

Time is of the essence
my prize possession
a memory of hard lessons
This beautiful watch

Memories of a special bond
as time flies by and life goes on
one minute you’re here, then you’re gone
This beautiful watch

Time management
while managing your time
you can make every minute count with
This beautiful watch

No one wants to do time
but we all need time
to get our priorities situated with
This beautiful watch
I love this watch
since it reminds me of my pops
I’m very grateful for
This beautiful watch

If my dad passes away
the memories I have will last all my days
thank God for
This beautiful watch

As I watch my watch
three hands caressing the numbers
tic tock puts me in deep slumber
This beautiful watch

My memories will go on
if don’t live on
I will give my daughter
This beautiful watch

Life is beautiful with the impact memories entail
in order to succeed, you have to learn
from the times you failed
This beautiful watch

Standing in a courtroom in front of a judge, beside my attorney, I was being offered eleven years for a crime I’d committed. Twenty-three years old, and clueless about the law, I was nervous—actually, scared shitless. I remember standing there, hearing the judge say, “The district attorney wants me to offer you eleven, but I’m only offering you nine. If you blow trial, I’ll be inclined to sentence you to a greater term than eleven.” At this point, I didn’t know what to do; it was the first time I was offered a number so high, and my greatest fear was blowing trial and receiving more time than I had been offered. All I could hear in the background was my father yelling, “Don’t do it, Son!” The only thing on my mind was making the decision that would be in my best interests. Sitting at the table, feeling so overwhelmed, scared, and ignorant of the law, I had a nervous breakdown, crying in front of the judge, my attorney, and part of the jury.

I started to consider taking the jail time that was being offered to me. My father left the courtroom in a state of disbelief. He couldn’t deal with seeing his oldest son go away to prison and was dissatisfied about me taking a “cop-out.” Even though my father and I never had a real close relationship throughout my life, he was still my father, so of course it was awful to have to watch me, his oldest son, get sent to prison. I never told him about the crime I committed. Even on the run, sleeping under his roof, I still couldn’t bring myself to tell him what I had done; I felt I couldn’t trust anybody but myself. Snapping back to reality, there I was, standing in the courtroom with a bunch of people I didn’t even know, who would ultimately determine my fate. It was at that moment I knew I had to be strong enough to hold it together and make the decision that had to be made. As I broke down in front of everyone, it felt like my life was over. Embarrassed and ashamed, I’d committed a crime I wasn’t ready to answer to. The judge requested for the jury to clear the room and for me to be escorted back to the cell until I was able to regain my composure. Sitting in that cell, the only thought I had was how has my life come to this? I had to make a choice that would impact my life in so many ways, more than I would understand at that moment.

After using my attorney to bargain with the judge, I was able to talk him down to a determinate term of eight and a half years. As much as I didn’t want to take that extensive amount of time, I was focused on trying to save my life. I regretted not accepting the five years that had been offered to me before my indictment. It was too late for me to worry about what I didn’t do in the past. By making this decision, I discovered my ability to...
take charge and claim responsibly for my own actions. This showed the development of my character, and the sense of morality I was displaying for the first time in my life. I was tired of living a criminal lifestyle, which was leading me down a road of self-destruction.

I wanted more out of life, and I wanted to chase my dreams of becoming an entertainer and producer in the music industry. At this point, I started to do a lot of self-reflecting, which made me look at what I was doing wrong in my life. Not only was I hurting myself, I was hurting my family and friends because of the choices I was making. I wasn't alone, but I had been living as if I didn't affect the people around me. Going to school wasn't important to me; making money to support how I lived was the only thing I focused on. Hanging out with gang members, traveling in and out of town, and selling drugs, my life seemed like a movie. I was attracted to glorifying temptations, unaware of the rude awakening I was headed for.

Two years after my incarceration, I started taking school seriously. I started striving to get my High School Equivalency diploma, and as difficult as it was, I succeeded. My family was happy that I decided to make changes within myself. I discovered that I was driven and didn't give up on things so easily, especially when I felt passionate about something. My new goal is to create a new future for myself and to make my family proud.

Coming back to prison isn't an option; I've already lost so much I will never be able to get back. I've already hurt so many people, besides myself, so it would be insane to continue making the same mistakes. As I'm completing my sixth year, I'm doing better than ever, as an NYU student and now an entrepreneur in training. I have goals and aspirations set for my future. My outlook on life alone has changed so much; I have new responsibilities to oversee, and I have to make sure all of my brothers and sisters receive nothing but the best of me. Right now, my focus is to be prepared for when I return home next January, because there is still a lot of work that needs to be done. Simply promising everybody that I won't come back to prison doesn't work. But seeing is believing, and actions speak louder than words. As long as I stick to my goals and remain focused, I can accomplish anything. People will no longer judge me as the person I used to be but as the man I am today, and that's the most important part.

Yes, the think tank is over, Event Horizon no stalling, lights cameras action, all eyes on me, watchin’ for the inner calling. So you’re looking for a tell, an experience, something, I know. Well, let’s talk about a place that influences for sho’.

GREATNESS, yeah, greatness is the place, that came in the form of jail, an undisgrace. For this place had a way with the people that was heard in the caption. He said this, but did that, it showed in his action.

I emitted uncertainty and doubt, but that was a small fraction. You see, like attracts like, but this I didn't know.

In sense, I’m into learning, the teacher was overdue to show.

Unbeknownst to me, this force didn’t deal with time and space, limitation or barrier.

So thru the walls, it came to be with me in this area.

In hindsight, I’ve been calling on this place for years, thru childhood traumas that became adult fears.

Building this mental full of hatred and rage.

Blindly meandering this path to the cage.

After watching American me, yeah I had a few frights.
And I been to city jail before, a couple days, it’s all right.
But going upstate, I’d be there a few more nights.

Moving right along, as time goes on, I wish I could say that was the last time I sang the “I’m locked up” song.
But nope, six years later, and not the streets; instead, I’m in Passaic County jail bout to fight over the top bunk bed.

But as greater vibes would have it, I slep’ on the bottom bunk, with no fuss and no havoc.
As a humble man, TAKING, not OFFERING, responsibility, for my actions I stand.
    All the times in jail, I knew it was my fault,
    Despite the bad stigma, I was given names of exalt,
    From Zeus to Herc and now Powerful, who woulda thought.
    Powerful is an attribute given by the God Wise,
    Who in the essence has me at a greater regard, so I rise.
    For instance, my moms says, “You’re anointed,” but I’m no preacher,
    I sit a ready student, so Sh’lel and Neburdja came in the form of the teacher.

    Life is great, and greater thru thought action,
    As moments go on, seeing what you want as an absolute fact is helping it pick up traction.
    This place of greatness that I speak comes raw, with plen’y of distraction. For you it may come in a different form, but it’s still THE LAW OF ATTRACTION.
    Thank you from the beginning ’til the end.

    AMEN

Time is the counting of a physical life. It is a key into past events. Time can also be considered as a unit of measurement from one place to another. Time is the most precious commodity we have. One that can be spent with others but not on them. Time is not money pouring out of the bank.

Time, at the very least, can be thought of as a tool, a tool that you can never lend to anyone. It is the one tool that if you lose it, you can never get it back. You cannot buy this tool from any hardware store, or online at any website.

Time is a gift, although some view it as a curse. Sometimes you will hear a person wishing for more time in order to do things differently. However, there is no time greater in power than that of the present.

So cherish time, spend it with those you love, use it to help others, and use time to your advantage. But do not waste time, don’t lose time, and don’t abuse time. Time is of the essence . . . and our essence is life.
When I was thirteen, I spent the summer with my estranged father so that I could get to know my eight-year-old brother, P.J., and I had been looking forward to it. I didn’t have summer school that year, and Cypress Terrace Apartments were always lively in the summer. One day, Dad paid his friend Mike to take P.J., Livia (my stepsister), and me to Water Country USA, a large water park in Williamsburg, Virginia. I was thrilled; there were going to be girls there... in bathing suits. There was just one problem. I didn’t know how to swim. No one knew my secret, and that’s how I was going to keep it.

Once we entered the park, there was water everywhere: wave pools, sliding chutes, children’s pools, deep ends to shallow waters, all of it filled with a joyous noise. I played the role of a professional swimmer, strutting around like I was twenty feet tall. Pretty girls my age were walking around everywhere. And I knew that to maintain the illusion of confidence, I could not get into the water if it rose above my head.

"Shawn, let’s go on the big waterslide, that’s the scariest one!" my brother pleaded, pointing at a twisting slide ending in a deep pool.

"We just ate." I said. "We better wait awhile so we don’t get cramps."

After all the excuses ran out, I rationalized within myself that I could pull this off and fly like an astronaut into outer space off the slide, navigate the water like a merman, and walk out glistening and shining. It was simple: Project myself so far that I land in the shallower part of the pool, and I could literally walk out; no one would ever figure out that I did not know how to swim. My brother, looking at me like I’m his hero, asks wearily, “Can we go on the ride now?” I simply nod with a confident smirk, thinking, This is going to work. We ascend the ladder for this ride that seemed to rival the Washington Monument in height. When we reach the platform, everyone on the ground seems to have gotten smaller, and the pool beneath the slide appears to have magnified. I am less confident, but I look at my brother and Livia and regain some of the strength I lost.
Gulping my saliva, thirsty but not for water, somehow it seems like I need air. Sweating—not from UV rays beaming on me from our brightest star but from the pressure of no longer being the biggest star in the eyes of my baby brother—I launch myself into space, and soaring I go, barreling down the chute. I pick up speed as water underneath me transports me to that water world waiting to catch me. At the end of the ride, as I exit the slide, the sun gets brighter somehow as time moves slowly. No longer do I have the support of the slide that transported me here, and in a flash, I’m in the air, and then I’m not. I go straight down. I search for the bottom; someone must have removed the bottom. There’s water everywhere. I don’t know where I am, as I reach out for anything to hold onto. Abort plan. . . I panic and splash. I want out of the womb of that Mother Earth, like a baby entering a new world to take his first breath. The doctor pulls me out of the birthing canal with an orange device and speaks to me in a firm voice, “That’s it, hold on.” It was the lifeguard saving me.

The truth came out that the twenty-foot giant that strutted around the pool had a weakness. I did not best the pool that day and never tried to swim again. I always wondered, When did man learn how to swim, anyway?

“Wake up, Son. Breakfast is almost ready.”

“Ughhhhh, come on, Ma, five more minutes,” was all I could muster up. Why must she ruin this precious moment of me snuggled tight within the warmth of my comforter? I briskly pulled my blanket over my head. a delightful whiff of the intoxicating smell of Gain detergent rapidly traveling into my nostrils. The smell of Gain always reminds me of my precious mother. That day was a special day for our family. It was our first breakfast in our new apartment. Finally, after the family court battles between my mother and father, my mother got her kids back.

Involuntarily, I’d finally gotten up, all discombobulated. My feet glided effortlessly across the freezing linoleum tiles, soaking up gritted sand, which reminded me of my bare feet. In my pursuit of the bathroom, I heard the clanging of pots and pans, and I got stuck in my tracks. I became mesmerized by the aroma of sweet hot cakes, fried bacon, and fresh hot cinnamon rolls. I stood there paralyzed, pondering upon how many pancakes, all soaked in that sweet maple syrup, I was going to foolishly devour. Breakfast for my mother meant an all-out buffet. My stomach kicked violently through my ribs, breaking me out of my trance, reminding me of my mission.

On my way to the bathroom, I cast a look into the kitchen, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. I witnessed my mother getting her groove on to the sounds of Marvin Gaye. “Sexual Healing” was piercing through the speakers of my mother’s boom box. That poor out-of-shape hanger leaning to one side served its purpose in attracting clear reception gracefully. My mother was in her zone, working that kitchen as a one-woman show. She had food assembled everywhere, her apron stained with dirty handprints while she continued to do her thing. I loved seeing my mother in those liberating moments, all happy and full of tranquility. Somehow, even that scar across my mother’s forehead looked perfect, like it was supposed to be there. I’m sure we’d never forget that horrific night when she’d gotten that beauty mark; another reason for our celebration: her emancipation from my oppressive and abusive father. We were safe now.
I remember the blistering sun, as it penetrated its way through our makeshift curtains. The heat from the steam in the kitchen and the sweltering sun had my body feeling all sticky and mushy. The sun had showered our kitchen with its light, heat, and energy. Those sharp but subtle rays, vertically beamed through our kitchen, made it seem as if our kitchen was split in half by a laser. The sunrays rested upon our kitchen table, advertising the pleasantries of my mother's hard work. It looked like a picture in a food magazine, with the exception of our dangling curtains. However, that immaculate table would've made you forget about those damn curtains.

Oh, silly me, how did I allow myself to become so stagnated that I'd lost focus of what I was supposed to have been doing? I remember trying so hard to pull myself away from that scene, but my desires got the best of me. Right whenever I'd thought I had the strength to leave, it was the steam from the grits pot that did it. It was amazing watching the steam make those funny animal shapes before evaporating into thin air. Next, it was those blueberry banana hot cakes sitting in the middle of the table calling for me. Those pancakes were stacked high, with creamy syrup flowing from the top, as if it was a waterfall, and landing at the base of the plate. Butter was coasting at the top of the pancakes, like a raft drowning in syrup. Oh man, resting right beside those cakes was a bowl of fruit salad, looking like a giant bowl of Now and Laters. Food has a way of bringing people together, and after all those years of being separated, that's what we needed, reunification.

Our new apartment wasn't much, but we were a family inside of our new home, and that's all that mattered. It was ours, from our worn-out doormat to the water-stained and pregnant ceiling that looked like ripples of an ocean. We were proud of our mother for providing a home for us. I remember sitting cross-legged on the floor, thinking about how exotic and beautiful our two-toned beige walls looked. I also remember those walls looking like giant, dingy tie-dye T-shirts. Nothing mattered to us about the condition of our home, because our mother came back for us. I remember sitting in the center of the floor with my bowl feeling secure and happy. My sister and I innocently playing footsie without a care in the world.

I can recollect being captivated at that precise moment by all of those vivid images and feelings. Something unexplainable and most profound was taking place in our kitchen that morning within my family. Now that I look back, I can fully grasp what was going on. The wisdom behind those experiences is the saying "Life is not about being dealt a good hand; it's about playing a poor hand well." That's what my family and I were celebrating: our defeat against the odds of being separated. That was the beginning of our victory reunion.

There we were, all three of us gathered at our kitchen table, ready for breakfast. Our table was glamorous, dressed with my mother's fancy tablecloth. This tablecloth could've brought life to any dull situation. It had blossomy patterns spilled across the center, while Barcelona orange flowers rested in each of its corners, flirting with the ground.

The table was set. I looked around from my left to my right. I was startled by the paradise I'd witnessed within the eyes of the most important women in all of my young life. I saw the young beauty nestled behind the wrinkles at the crack of my mother's eyes. Her slicked-back baby hairs edging the shape of her oval head made her look like an angelic teenager. Decorating her ears were those half-moon earrings my sister and I gave her several years before on Mother's Day. To the left of me was my big-head sister. I didn't understand why my mother had allowed my sister to fix her own hair that day. I was tired of seeing those two goofy-ass ponytails with blue and white beads hanging at the bottom. I couldn't believe she had the nerve to smile ear-to-ear, as if she wasn't missing her front teeth. It cracked me up how whenever my sister talked, food would fly out of her mouth where her front teeth were supposed to be. She would nonchalantly pick it back up and continue to eat, which was just what she was doing at that precise moment. She had her favorite ruffled-collar shirt all ruined with cake mix and syrup. Somehow, she'd managed to keep her paper towel in position, protecting her ruffles.

I couldn't help but notice my mother in deep thought, as tears flowed effortlessly down her face. She just broke down and starting crying out of nowhere. My sister was patting her on her back with one hand, whispering, "Momma, don't cry," while balancing a forkful of pancakes in the other. I just got up and started preparing her plate and gently rubbed her arms. I'd asked her what was wrong, and she conveyed to us how bad she felt leaving my sister and me for all those years. She promised to never leave us again.

What really set the tone that day was how Bill Withers's song "Lean on Me" came on at that perfect moment. My mother motioned for me to sit down, and I did. She reached for the hands of my sister and me and said, "Let's pray."
WHO IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSON IN YOUR LIFE?

JOHNATHAN SALGADO

Who is the most important person in your life? Well, I wouldn’t have enough paper in the world or time on the clock to tell you about mine. You see, we all have that special person who is closest to our hearts. The person who not only picks us up when we are down but doesn’t leave until we can walk again. The person who you not only ask for advice but rely on it. The person who is the umbrella to your rain, the pillow to your sleep. We all have that special person who we can have a full conversation with without saying a single word. And when we have days when we can’t handle life’s ways, just hearing the sound of that special person’s voice can give us the strength to keep moving forward. Or when your heart is shattered to pieces, that person will cut themselves to put the pieces back together again.

How would I know? Because I have that special person. I’m not lucky, or blessed, because these words are an understatement. I am honored to have this special person. That person is the bandage to my wounds, my light when it’s dark. They have been my friend, my partner, my reason to keep moving forward. That special person is the reason that I am who I am today, because I’ll be living without a purpose, without them I just can’t be. Mother, I hope that you know that you mean the world to me, and my heart doesn’t belong to anyone, only you hold the key.

LITTLE BROTHER

QUANMIK WELLS

The first time I heard your voice as an adult, you were so grown, so much bass in your tone. I couldn’t remember you being so certain about your personality. Even though I’ve been absent for some years now, the family-oriented side of me yearns for the rekindling of our relationship. Born by separate Earths, but sharing one burning sun, we are so much alike in so many ways. Choices, decisions, decisions and choices. This is what bridged the gap between us. Six years into an eight-and-a-half-year bid; my return is soon to come. For now, our phone conversations are the closest thing we have to each other. Compare and reflect: in so many ways, we are alike—big brother, little brother. I see you but know it’s me. Nine years apart, you are still the third oldest of our old king’s seven born. Handsome, charming, intelligent, and entering the beginning of manhood, life’s experiences will mold you into the man you will become. The respect for what’s right and just will display your character and sense of morality. The ability to do what’s right, even though free will gives the choice of wrong, this shows the God that’s within. I’m sorry I’ve missed out on some of the most important, vital, and irreplaceable parts of your life. Unfortunately, it took a prison ordeal for me to realize the people I was affecting and the path I was headed down. I remember holding you in my arms. I was only ten at the time. When I looked at this newborn—my youngest sibling at the moment, Prince Ivy was his name—the connection I felt was a newfound bond that we could always share, no matter what.

Separated by many barriers, we were still able to keep our relationship and bond untarnished. In the absence of our old king, not only were we able to survive life’s temptations, but we were able to grow into men, by learning from our environment and the morals our old Earths taught us. Still, I see me within you: handsome, intelligent, loving, caring, respectable, innovative, and strongly driven. Your mind and its intellect can take you beyond the borders of your imagination. Let that guide you throughout your journey for success. From me to you, Big Brother, Little Brother, I love you always, peace . . .
I remember this day quite clear, as if it was yesterday. Thinking of it feels like déjà vu. Listening to the Cyclone, depressed, sad, and crying on the tracks, like he lost someone close to him. It was very difficult to get my mind off of it; feeling empathy for the Cyclone, since I also know the feeling of losing someone close to me. The Cyclone is symbolic for a Brooklynite as myself; it’s a symbol of freedom, and that I was, free. Free to become who I wanted to be. Coney Island was a magical place; people from everywhere would spend time at this landmark, just to experience the magic. You can take photos like a celebrity and win prizes like a game show. No matter how old you are, you can act as children and not be judged. How cool is that?

It was a beautiful summer day, the birds were humming and singing together a tune by Peaches and Herb called “Reunited.” The temperature was in the mid-nineties, it was very hazy, and everyone was sweating like they were nervous. Watching the children run wild took me back to an episode of National Geographic when the hyenas were running in a pack, yelling and laughing. My daughter was confused and indecisive, she was not sure which ride was going to be first, so she kept running back and forth, like a mental patient in an asylum. My heart was beating very fast, it sounded like two Jamaicans playing a beat on the drums. I can tell my little girl enjoyed coming to this place by the excitement she displayed. Her eyes were radiant, like the headlights of a car, and beaming with joy. Visiting Coney Island reminded me of a time when I was my daughter's age, and I used to get dressed up for Easter, just to go out with my parents. I cherish and enjoy those memories, like a sweater my grandmom gave me for Christmas before she passed.

Even though I was a bit young to appreciate anything, I had a wonderful childhood, thanks to my parents. All I want for my daughter to have is a wonderful childhood and memories of the wonderful things she and I have done together. I hope when my daughter, Paris, becomes an adult, she also can have similar experiences with her children. Let’s hope that it can become a tradition, how families come together for certain holidays, and just not for funerals. I guess when you’re having fun, you never want the fun to end. We only live once, but a memory lasts forever, just like the love me and my daughter share that is unconditional. This is why I chose to write about my little girl, who I have not seen in years. I’m appreciative enough to get to see my daughter grow up through pictures.

This memory that lives vividly and sticks out like a sore thumb because part of me wishes I hadn’t been so selfish and self-centered. I did not care about anything, not even myself, when I committed this crime. I’m not there to shield my daughter from the ignorance of this cold world. As I put this pen to this paper and watch it cry, it gives me relief to know that one day, I will reunite with my daughter. The difference between this time and last time is that now I will be educated, concerned, caring, and unselfish, not just to myself but to everyone. I will make up for lost time with my daughter, who will be a teenager when I get home. I want to thank everyone for this opportunity, for allowing me to express how I truly feel, about the love I have for my daughter, Paris Destiny, and I hope she will be able to read this. Holding on to these memories of my daughter has allowed me to get through the rough times in prison. I need her to understand that her dad made a mistake, but I found my true love, turning a negative experience into a positive experience through writing, which gave me freedom from the ignorance of the world. I do not have to resort to other methods that are destructive to the wellbeing of others or myself. If only this could have been available to me when I was younger, being in prison would not have been an option. Education could have been used as a platform for higher learning, enlightening the youth on creativity, our future leaders of the world.

So, Paris Destiny, if you find yourself reading this story, I love you with all my heart, and I can’t wait ‘til the day we can spend time together. You inspired me to keep writing about how I feel. Thank you.

Respectfully,
Omar Padilla
A sheet of paper goes wherever the current takes it.
I remember driving nowhere. Just wanting to be in your presence. Figuring that no matter where we go, I will be content. Finding anywhere to settle but not settling at all, wanting to be everywhere, realizing everywhere is here. Going to the beach just to start a fire, realizing we had no wood and going to get some. Finding the wood at the top of that hill which is so peaceful, not wanting to leave. Talking about our aspirations, dreams, future, and love. After arriving there in time to see the sunrise. Like two pieces of paper in the wind going where the world takes us. Picking up once again to glide along with the world. Reaching a corner store on my block. Me watching you stand there waiting for me to buy snacks. All I am thinking is the love, joy, and care I have for you. Thinking of your beauty, trying to think of what you're thinking while waiting for me. When I reach you, I hug you from behind, and I know this is where I always want to be. And we dance like two pieces of paper in the wind, to our own rhythm, to the world's rhythm, to no rhythm but our love for one another. You laughing at the unexpectedness of the gesture. Like the sweet noise of the world and the people in it. Them watching us in the middle of Brooklyn, just dancing. Not realizing we landed right where we wanted to be, in the comfort of family. We make our way home. The air between us picks up, as we’re swept up in a devil's wind. You feed my soul like words to my paper. When we finally gather ourselves, I stare into your deep brown eyes. You kiss me with so much love my body shivers as my heart skips beats, and you ask me, “Where have you been?” I tell you, “Floating, trying to find you.” I tell you the day nine years prior when you stole my heart. You kiss me again to let me know you’re here. As we drift asleep. I wake to spill more words on your paper, words to show how much you mean to me, how deep my love is for you, but you have taken to the current of the new day. I lie there and think of our free-spirited yesterday until it is time for me to find my current. Like the pieces of paper, carelessly floating. Not knowing where they will end up, what they will run into, every move and action a surprise, and picking up and landing in new places, like love. Like the loves of my life. Until we meet again.
Love is when one has become the object of affection for another. She is the level of understanding where you understand that some things are not meant to be understood, and you accept that. Love is when the person you love keeps on giving you reasons to love them simply by just being in your life.

Love is one of the few truths that has transcended time and space. She reaches out into the depths of our minds. She keeps afloat those who dare to dive into her unknown waters.

Now remember, there is only one type of love... True Love. You will recognize her by her kind, gentle, and warm nature. She nurtures the recipient and invigorates her giver.

True love builds a foundation that cannot be shaken by the most trying of times. She is all-giving and says things like we, us, and ours, never yours or mine.

Love has all the pure qualities and is not associated with jealousy, control, deception, or manipulation. These qualities come from something sinister, something unnatural, some artificial creation disguised as love attempting to catch its prey.

So, if you are ever confused about what love is, read this again and again, then ask yourself the following question: Do I feel loved, protected, nurtured, and respected? If you feel safe, happy, and the answer is yes, then you are loved, Love, and this is where my pen rests.
What is America? Well, it depends on who you’re asking. America could be a land of dreams and opportunities for some. Where you can do what you want and possibly be what you want. Where the Internet could make you a star and talent is not a prerequisite for fame and fortune. A place where you could build a car, build a house, build your brand, Build-A-Bear. A land of strip clubs, strip malls, and emojis. Where you could watch football on enormous TVs. Where you have a billion channels, but nothing is ever on. Unfortunately, for many, that is not what America is like, that is not the America they have experienced. America may be called the land of the free, but not everyone here is really free. It is a racist, homophobic, and misogynist society. Where people hate, judge, ridicule, and disrespect you just for who you are, for who you love, for who you worship. Where unsubstantiated stereotypes are facts. Where bullying is frowned upon, yet everyone seems to do it. Where the poverty and mental health problems are swept under the rug. Where the homeless sit in front of check-cashing stores, hoping for sympathy, but are given apathy instead. Where Donald Trump can grab her by the pussy and still become president. America is a lot of different things to a lot of different people at different times. America is a constantly changing perception.

To a woman, America is a glass ceiling. It is a constant battle for equality and independence. Where having more experience and qualifications will not ensure that you will get paid more than a man who doesn’t. A place where everyone judges you on your appearance and where beauty matters most. Where your body is manipulated in magazines to appear unachievably perfect. It is using plastic surgery to try to achieve that. It is skinny jeans and Spanx. It is body shaming, stretch marks, waist trainers, and Flat Tummy Tea. Where laws about what you can do with your body are created by old white men without any input from you. A place where you are blamed for crimes committed against you because of the way you dressed, or you were too flirty, or you were too drunk, or you led him on. Where you can want, but not too much. Where you’re supposed to just be quiet and stay in your place. Where you’re supposed to be barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen. It is cheating husbands and abusive boyfriends. Where sexual freedom also means slut. It is short skirts and six-inch heels. Makeup, push-up bras, and tramp stamps. Where sexual harassment is just boys being boys. It is pick the kids up from school,
drop them off at soccer practice, take them to the doctor, make dinner, clean the house, do
the laundry—you’re expected to do everything. It is your mother asking, Where are you going
to get married? Where everyone wants to touch your belly when you’re pregnant. It is bridal
showers, baby showers, sonogram parties, gender-reveal parties, and push presents.
A place where if you say, I don’t want to have children, people look at you like you’re crazy.
Where if you get too mad, people ask, Is she on her period? It is Wonder Woman. It is Fearless Girl
on Wall Street . . . and a man wanting it removed. Where being too much of anything is a bad
thing, and double standards are the normal standards.

For the working class, America is taxes, taxes, taxes. Where the more you make, the
more the government takes. It is unfair wages. It is living check to check. It is IRAs, 401Ks,
Medicaid, and Social Security all coming out of your check. It is Affirmative Action. Where
you punch in and punch out, punch in and punch out. It is water cooler gossip. It is I Hate
Mondays and Hump Day! and TGIF! It is sick days, retirement parties, and mass layoffs. A
place where the factories are closing, and the jobs are going overseas. It is nepotism and
office Christmas parties. It is two-week vacations. It is short maternity leaves. Where you
put food on the table, pay the rent, and hopefully have enough left over to go and see the
new Marvel movie.

For black people, America feels like it isn’t for you. A place that your ancestors built
but you don’t own. It is three hundred plus years of legal racism that hasn’t completely
ended yet. It is major obstacles you face day in and day out. Where you’re portrayed
unfairly in movies and television. Where the media paints this picture of you that is full of
constant rage. It is being feared but also fearing for your own life. A place where the police
may kill you just for being black. It is a bias that you cannot shake, poverty that weighs on
your back, barriers that you cannot get past. It is being good at sports or knowing how to
play your language. It is Michelle Obama and Obamcare. It is the first black president and
a Pyrrhic victory. Where the first black four still happens. It is thick women and lip gloss.
Where there are no black-owned businesses in your neighborhood. Where being a video
vixen and an Instagram model are #lifegoals. Where if your baby mother is a stripper or
a startender, that’s normal. Where if your baby father is a dope boy or in jail, that’s
normal too. It is Basketball Wives, The Real Housewives of Atlanta, and Love & Hip Hop. It is Hot
97, Where hip-hop lives and The Breakfast Club, the world’s most dangerous morning show. It is the
Black Lives Matter movement. It is the murder of your people by your people. Where
black lives don’t matter, not even to black people.

When you’re a Latino immigrant, America is a better life. It is the ability to help
your family and provide a brighter future for your children. It is a foundation. It is hope.
A place where lazy Americans complain all the time. Where you get paid in cash and don’t
have healthcare. It is sending money back to your country for your abuelos. It is building
walls and crossing borders. It is ICE, detention centers, and deportation. Where Me no speak
English is your defense mechanism. Where they think you’re all a bunch of drug
mules and criminals. Where the President wants you to go back to where you came from.
Where you’re the fastest growing population. It is first-generation Americans. It is so
many wonderful opportunities.

To white people, America is . . . America. A place of hopes and dreams. It is
privilege. It is freedom. It is Give us back our country, but from whom? A place you
discovered. Where stolen land is claimed as yours. Where you celebrate Christopher
Columbus Day. It is guilt for how your great grandparents treated black people. It is
having a black friend. It is Barack Obama and Donald Trump. It is the KKK and the NRA.
It is mass shootings and lax gun laws. It is your second amendment rights. It is good
neighborhoods and neighborhood watch. It is poverty, white trash, and trailer parks. It
is biracial babies. Where racism doesn’t exist anymore. It is being politically correct. It is
racist jokes. It is Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. A place where a cop saying
I feared for my life is a good enough reason. It is looking down on anyone that doesn’t speak
English. It is seeing yourself in every movie, television show, and magazine cover. It is
owning everything. Where you can be anything you want. It is tans, lip injections, hair
weaves, and butt enhancements. It is Saggy jeans, hats to the back, and hip-hop. It is
emulating black culture but still clenching your purse when a black person passes.

When you have a felony, America is a closed door. It is a lack of opportunity. A
place that is unforgiving and never lets you forget your past. Where you never really
pay your debt to society. It is Have you been convicted of a felony in the last seven years? on job
applications. It is Sorry, we’re not hiring at this time. It is We did a background check, and you lied about your criminal history. We have to let you go. Where you have to take three mandatory programs a week, so how are you expected to keep a job? Where the odds are stacked against you. Where your family still thinks you’re selling drugs. A place where people whisper, It’s only a matter of time before he goes back to jail. Where you’re trying to do the right thing because you have a daughter. It is heading back to the same neighborhood you came from in hopes of a different outcome this time.

For the rich, America is a playground. A place where you do whatever you want and have whatever you want. It is power. It is control. It is fast cars and cocaine. It is private jets and empty mansions. It is Ivy League schools and country clubs. It is good cigars and golf, expensive clothes and lobsters. It is jewelry and tears, divorces and second wives. It is alimony and suicides. Where you’re only one bad deal away from losing it all. It is sheisty lawyers and tax cuts. It is balls, banquet, and dinners. It is big yachts and mistresses. It is luxury skyboxes and floor seats. Where money is a panacea. Where you make the laws, bend the laws, and break the laws. Where you control the media. It is political allies, lobbyists, Super PACs, and controlling the elections. It is butlers, nannies, and third wives.

For a parent, America is filled with so much danger. A place that you worry will hurt your children one day. Where you must protect your children. It is misleading. A place that is full of tricks and scams that you must warn your children of. Where It’s ten p.m., Do you know where your children are? Where people tell your children they can be whatever they want, when the truth is they can be whatever they’re good at, and then it still helps to know somebody. It is formula milk, teething, pacifiers, Wet Wipes. It’s your turn to get up, throw up, and dirty diapers. It is step-up ceremonies and paying for photos, kindergarten graduations and paying for more photos, elementary school graduations and paying for more photos, junior high school graduations and paying for more photos, high school graduations and paying for more photos, then hopefully college graduations but no photos. It is minivans. It is the talk. It is lectures and You’re grounded! Where you want the best for your children and are always going to be concerned about their wellbeing. Where No matter how old you get, you’re still my baby.

When you’re a teenager, America is where your parents just don’t understand. A place that is filled with old and outdated rules. It is college applications, but being unsure if you even want to go. Where hanging out with friends means everything to you. It is high school bullies, the popular kids, and prom dates. Where you try to fit in.

Where you smoke weed and daydream about the future. It is This is your brain; this is your brain on drugs. Any questions? It is learner’s permits and after-school fights. It is tons of homework. It is cutting class, peer pressure, and virginities lost. Where This is my house; these are my rules is supposed to be law. It is crushes and heartbreaks. Where you secretly watch porn. It is You hang up; no, you hang up; no, you hang up first. Where you argue with your parents, slam doors, and they say, I brought you into this world; I’ll take you out. It is Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook Live. Where you want to be accepted for who you are, but don’t quite know who that is yet.

To the elderly, America is being forgotten. It is wheelchairs and walkers. It is I’ve fallen and I can’t get up commercials. Where you’re shuttled off to nursing homes. Where your family doesn’t visit. It is AARP and Social Security. Where con men try to steal all your money. Where your grandkids spend all your money. It is funerals and Depend. Where you fall asleep in front of the TV. It is bingo and casino trips. It is Viagra and dentures. It is What did I come into this room for? It is Del Boca Vista, Florida. It is doctor appointments and more doctor appointments. pills and more pills. It is body aches and Bengay. It is things not being the way they use to be. Where they say things are getting better. Where you’re able to see that things are only getting worse. It is being able to hold your great-grandbaby.

Some people say Make America Great Again. But we can’t because America was never great to begin with. We can make America appear to be great again, but it will never be great. America’s good is constantly outweighed by the constant oppression that it perpetuates, and it is only getting worse. With the Muslim bans disguised as terrorist vetting, continued killing of unarmed black people, Fox News, North Korea’s nuclear threat, and President Trump’s Twitter account, it is hard to tell if it will ever get any better. America, which was once the most powerful and respected country in the world, has become a laughingstock. It is seen by the rest of the world as a bunch of hypocrites who are violent and weak. A place that will criticize everyone else’s front yard but won’t look in its own backyard.

Before I wrote this, I read an article in GQ Magazine about Mahershala Ali, an Oscar-winning actor. In it he said, ‘I absolutely love this country, but like so many people have some real questions and concerns about how things have gone down over the years and where we’re at. And that’s from a place of love, because I want the country to be what it says it is on paper.’ I couldn’t agree more.

What is America to you?
AMERICAN DREAM
SHAQUAN HINDS

Land of the free, or liberty for a fee? The great American dream.
But sometimes a nightmare is what it seems.
From the north to the south, east to the west,
All over the globe, they travel to be a part of the best.

Famine nights, skin cold as ice. Electricity gone . . .
Fire barrels used for light.
The American spirit keeps pushing, even though victory is far from sight.
A mother holds her child tight
To provide warmth for the night.

Countless murders!
Justice something only the rich have heard of.
Mass incarceration!
To take away the color from our beautiful nation.
Modern-day slavery.
A new way for the white man to say, Fuck you, pay me.

The game went from physical to mental.
But the deck is stacked, so to win is far from simple.
Elite minds controlling an elaborate scheme.
Environments designed to keep us away from the cream.

Things are changing, but new problems occur.
Like white kids having better educations than blacks is what they prefer.
The nation is segregating, Trump is legislating.
Immigrants are debating, their families forced into separating.

We’re at a time when we tend to forget how far we’ve come.
Not remembering the past and what was done.
The lashes on our grandfathers’ backs.
The awful cries when the sound of the whip would crack.

Through it all though, possibilities are endless.
At every street corner, you’ll see many incentives.
A way to succeed if only you strive to achieve.
A perfect blend of good and evil, which can only be described as the American dream.
A Rich Port one of a kind
The land of enchanting views
A place of my parents’ birthrights
Home
I can’t deny
That I’m a proud Puerto Rican
The heritage runs deep in my veins
For I am mixed with African, Indian, and Spaniard
I embrace the culture of the ones before me
Who died for the rights we have today
And even though I’m far from home, locked away.
You can take the Puerto Rican out of Puerto Rico
But can’t take this beautiful Island (Puerto Rico)
Away, I’m going to die Puerto Rican someday
Because I bleed Latino blood
Waving my flag with pride and love
There’s nothing quite like my Island
We are so unique
The food, the people, and the music (salsa)

The combination made celebrities like
Tito Puente, La India, and Daddy Yankee
Tito el Bambino, Tego, and Jennifer Lopez
having so much in common
because we all come from the same Island
I love my People
Whether you’re rich, middle class, or poor
We are all equal
Coming from the same struggle
Enslaved by the gringos
While they extract from our Island
The precious resources
Leaving us in poverty
We must overcome our adversities
And rise above
The violence and drugs
Viva Puerto Rico
Coming from the heart
With a lot of love
Puerto Rican to the day I die
Today is a new reality, not much different from yesterday. My eyes open at midpoint, after being awakened from my true freedom, my fantasy world, the world in which I live an internal life.

THE COUNT IS ON!!

My door opens. Shit, this 5:45 a.m. count is killing me. I soon drift back off after the officer completes his round, the same routine to repeat at seven. At this point, my day starts. Still tired, and physically exhausted, I make my way to the bathroom to brush my teeth. Not wanting to be bothered or spoken to—it’s too early for conversation—I head back to my cell, so I can prepare breakfast.

As the day continues, I’m forced to deal with encounters based on falsification. Having to adapt to individuals who either bow to those in a position of power or abandon their true identities in order to “fit in.”

So, I ask, what’s real? My mind wanders like an ant on concrete who has no specific direction but seems to know his purpose. What’s the purpose of dealing with individuals who are obviously frozen at thirty-two degrees, while simultaneously existing within a matrix? Real or reality? Better yet, let me borrow your eyes. Damn, it’s dark, I can’t see, nor can I hear anything around me. I don’t understand what’s going on, I’m scared, I don’t even understand myself. My identity has been created by all the temptations that exist within this reality. Because of my misconception of values, I patronize others, and I use exploitation as a method for staying on top, or even just surviving. The plan to self-destruct is premeditated by the mastermind, the architect, the invisible. The hand that rules controls the flow of things and governs all things in accordance. Can we see through the clouds, or will the invisible storm continue to rage? It’s just reality, or what’s real. How do you see things? How do you feel?

We have uprooted and grown from scarred trees. Strange fruit in bloom. We have recovered from our mental gloom, no longer studying from books that spelled doom. Doomed to fail. Doomed to self-destruct. Even Willie Lynch warned, “One day, they may wake up.”

Shaking foundations, you no longer have us in your clutch. You’re still trying to grab hold of what you cannot touch? Free will. My will is free! No longer up for sale like my ancestors in slavery. Or like me, when I was blind to myself. Because knowledge, that is my wealth, and that is my power. The power to think the shackles off a nation, reporting to you live from a New York State plantation, where our thoughts are trains leaving the imagination station, no longer stopping along the lines of stagnation.

So, for all those out there wandering around, waiting for time to pass them by, these warm thoughts should reverse the tears from an ice-cold cry, defrosting from years of mental abuse, we are offering rides on the freedom caboose.

I feel myself growing stronger . . . mentally, physically, and spiritually. Fighting against the oppression that tries to stifle my introspection, while they can’t fathom my self-protection through non-violent self-protesting. They find it quite vexing that our minds are finally connecting, reflecting the light that was sparked in the minds and hearts of those once counted as lost.

The fact that I now use my mind to dissect my reality into little pieces of do-ability, instead of thoughts of insecurity that could eventually end me, is quite unsettling to the powers that be, those who want me to be the old me, so they can lock and control me.

Moving peacefully is more of a threat than violence, for as long as I was moving like a savage, my words they didn’t care to silence. But now that I have calmed down, I speak words of wisdom. “Oh how we hate that sound.” That’s what I heard ‘em say when I rendered that mind-opening essay.

So now I move in silence with my actions misconstrued as violence. King of the walking dead, the underworld crowned me their highness, minus all the time lesser people see you but refuse to greet you as their equal.

And why should they? Bad birds flock together, and they’re just birds of prey, who don’t pray at all, other than for our downfall. Mad at us because the harder they whip us and try to pride-stripe us, the more we stand tall. Clear vision, like the eye of a hurricane that made landfall. My voice isn’t the voice of one, but the voice of all; all those who came before me, and all of those not yet born. Living in fear that my voice might spark the next revolution, revealing what they have been concealing, that I am God. That God and man were never meant to be apart, and God is what beats in your heart.
(R)EVOLUTION

HIP-HOP
DARION ALLS (AKA TOXIC ©18)

HELPING INDIGENT PEOPLE HANDLE OPPRESSION POSITIVELY. Her birthplace 1973, Bronx, New York City; her forefather DJ KOOL HERC. Starting with a speck of light, like one star to the trillions of stars in the universe. Rubbing vinyl records together on a turntable to blend beats for your listening pleasure. Now, as she gains momentum and trajectory to pulsate forward, an MC is born. The microphone controller could be compared to the likes of a master of ceremonies at a college graduation. The layers that HIP-HOP has seen in the forty-four years of its existence . . . No one individual should have to endure that type of pain and suffering. She has constitutionally suffered censorship. Exploitation / a vessel for experimentation requiring explicit concentration / a culture abused from a place sacred and hued / A value tagged on the priceless / an outlet for the soul now taken a ho stroll with a Dr. Seuss nod and slave chains of gold. / Going through changes with many different faces, once the oppressors, confessor, a street-dreamers director, B-BOYS’ perspective a message of self / expression without a label watching / that’s the start of the problem / if knowledge is power, why is money the only option? / Enjoy it while you got it, but my break-beat became a broken promise. For an elevated mind state, you have to look underground / DJs digging for treasures / that’s where the roots are buried and your skills get measured. Times change but HIP-HOP became a weapon for attention / just copy the next man’s suggestion, reveal your intentions / drugs and violence is all HIP-HOP is, don’t be fooled by the culture vultures. HIP-HOP’s for the kidz / it’s not ratings but a life lived. Maybe I’m just showing my age, bitter not accepting change, hypocritical-hop is more my range / I wasn’t ready for the light and got blinded by the rays / Who would have thought a Bronx-born soundwave would become a religion without a page. / An art form commercialized, bubble-gum wrapped, corporate cancer promoted by invisible oppressors dictating personality type. I salute “NO IDEA’S ORIGINAL / PENITENTIARY-MAIL” PODCAST AND RADIO SHOW WITH DJ ENYOUTEE AND FREDDY FOXXX (AKA BUMPY-KNuckles)” for providing a HIP-HOP SHOW in its purest form. Not once in the seven years of its existence did they water down the craft of the HIP-HOP culture / which allows me to wait here at the HIP-HOP gate, like the changing of the guards, knowing the culture is making its way back to its original form:

HELPING INDIGENT PEOPLE HANDLE OPPRESSION POSITIVELY! PEACE!!
I’m LOST
RAYVON GORDON

How do you tell your child “I’m lost?”
And you have only chosen to know what the streets cemented,
A callous heart for suckers.
Inborn to sink deep, to stand in a coffin.
Strain from kissing, mouth on the ruckus.
“Gun-stokers” and “knife-cutters.” Neighborhood flooders.
The populated world lovers.
How do you tell your child “I’m lost?”

Holding a hand, looking upward to the sky for direction.
Nature’s compass impressed in the slums’ transgression.
Scorched blind by the mistreated sun.
Nurture the flower only to be left like mud.
How do you tell your child “I’m lost?”

Aspiring to be perfect in this imperfect world.
Beauty is a legacy
And
Lesson’s pleasantries you’ll die trying to unfurl.
Repress energies from little boys and girls.
Ravaged like molten seas, malnourished and perplexed.
As you curve a foul,
Chagrined by such a stylistic complex.
How do you tell your child “I’m lost?”

PERSEVERE
AUNRAY STANFORD

My emotions are like broken glass
Scattered, hard to detect
Cutting deep into my spirit
And reopening old wounds
With each attempt at piecing me back together
Wandering aimlessly
Harassed by the bitter cold of New York City winters
And I wander
Countless sins committed to reaffirm my manhood
In the eyes of those equally blind
And I wander
The devil applauds my endurance
As I walk through these flames
That will eventually burn
My sanity to ashes
Death is a natural part of life, but once she arrives, she brings with her a flood of emotions: confusion, pain, sadness, loss, abandonment, anger . . .

Who knows why she exists. Maybe she exists to make room for new lives to bud and blossom like fields of jasmine and clovers, clearing themselves for the next generation to carry on their legacy of beauty. Or maybe without death, there could be no life!

How could we know what life is, if not measured against death?

Death is meant to be celebrated, enjoyed, embraced! Death causes us to remember . . . remember the memories that would be lost to the sands of time. Death is the force that causes us to embrace those who survive her touch even closer than we had before her life-changing visit. She is the reason we find ways to enjoy life, and fill it with moments to be cherished and shared.

So why waste time hating death? She makes room for new life! Can you imagine how crowded the planet would be if she did not visit us from time to time?

So live life, enjoy time, and embrace death.

Have you ever had your inner voice calling you?
But you just never picked up?
I have . . . I call that ignoring your Soul Phone when it rings!

Our dreams are now like voicemails that we never check.
Is it because we are content living in the shell we made to be our bed?
Or is it letting go of the threat?
Like when a father realizes his daughter is no longer a baby, but an adolescent.

“Answer me, answer me!”
It yells, but we just don’t.
Instead, we disconnect the cord from the phone.
Poisoning the mind with detrimental elements,
Not even making time to receive the messages.

I can say, at most, I checked my caller ID.
It read Destiny . . .
Over and over it called
To put me on track
With the right-trained thoughts.
But I deleted them as if it never rang at all.
Now that times went from good to bad,
I’m praying you call me back.
I’m praying you show me signs
Like I’m on a highway.
’Cause all my exit routes now have barricades,
With nowhere to turn nor to escape.
This time, I promise to let you navigate.

Emergencies occurred, and you called to check up on me again.
For the longest, I needed you and me to converse.
Now that we did, I can’t get your words off my brain.
You said, “Hard work plus faith can make me someone great,
Even if it makes you run an extra mile a day.”

The last time your inner voice called, did you pick up?
I did . . . I call that answering your soul phone when it rings!
conceptualized being a product of my environment, all I’d ever be, and nothing more. I had given up on myself and hid behind all types of excuses. My most believable excuse was: Life’s not fair; no matter how hard I try, the odds will always be stacked against me, because this is a white man’s world. With this being said, I married into the street life, and I never turned back. This lifestyle became all I cared to know, me being anything other than a thug was uncivilized. Why would I have left the street life—with instant gratification and worldly desires being fulfilled—a sure thing, in return for a change... the unknown? There was no room to think about anything else but getting money, survival. I was tired of being poor and picked on.

I saw all of the injustices taking place within governmental structures. These injustices were aimed to dismantle the minority communities by blocking any possibilities of socioeconomic growth and development. I understood how and why these governmental social structures were systematically designed to terminate any potential social cohesion or capital within minority communities. These structural strains on a community provoke a type of structural violence that keeps a community disenfranchised and subordinated to the powers that be. At such a young age, I clearly understood all this. I knew my future was doomed. I was determined to get mine by all means because I understood my country didn’t have my best interest at heart. I got way too comfortable and relaxed in those streets, the fast life: fast women, fast cars, fast money, fast entertainment, fast everything, just partying and bullshitting.

WOW, my thoughts were interrupted by the sound of names being called. I slid out of that abyss and realized I’d missed half of the graduation to my trip down memory lane. My name would be called next. At age thirty-one, I will gracefully walk across that stage and receive my GED. This is my first academic achievement, and the thought of this intensifies my nervousness. My nerves are all over the place, twisted up like someone wringing out a wet towel to be dried. I feel knots of pressure nestled at the base of my stomach.

My stomach is a trampoline, as a ton of pressure from my nerves violently jumps atop my bladder, causing a yearning sensation for the restroom. My heart surges into my throat. Not only that, it stops beating for what seems like forever. I cannot breathe. My thoughts, feelings, and emotions are a tornado, increasing in speed by the millisecond. I am one tenth of a second away from fainting. What’s going on? Am I having a nervous breakdown?

My nerves just go into autopilot, doing whatever they want without my permission. Oops, did I just fart? I hope nobody heard it, but it smells terrible. Damn it, I’ll just play dumb, so I turn around and start looking for the suspect like everyone else is doing.
Oh NO, are these tears forming in my eyes? My body didn’t get permission from me to do this shit. I cannot do this right here, right now, in front of all these people. Why am I even crying? I’m not hurt, in fact, I’m proud of myself, of this day, and of this moment. Hold on, underneath all this happiness, I do find sadness. My family is not here to share this moment with me. I’m certain that through the thousands of miles that separate us, they are experiencing this moment in spirit.

Imagine this, a thug-ass dude getting all emotional and all tear-y-eyed, on the verge of breaking down, boo-woo crying. I want nothing more at this moment than my momma. I’m relieved that my gangsta homies aren’t here to witness this vulnerable moment. Then again, they should have been here for their own personal growth and development. This type of positive peer pressure is missing amongst peers from my hood.

I hear my name being called; somehow, I manage to stand. My knees are wet noodles, so I wobble trying to find balance. I make my way to the stage, shake hands, and receive my GED. Such a regal feeling as my fingers massage the grooves of the fancy embroidery on this paper. This joy I’m feeling does not derive from this fancy piece of paper; it derives from my endurance and perseverance. I’m remembering those hot days, no fan, and one packed classroom. There were about thirteen disruptive classmates who interfered with my learning. It was extremely challenging, being out of school for so long. I didn’t give up. This brings me joy, highly achieving my goal.

In this precise moment, I’m receiving an epiphany. Applied knowledge mixed with pure ambition is my key to success. Today I can appreciate the value of honest hard work and dedication, this formula plants seeds of determination, honor, integrity, and dignity. These are ingredients needed in order to become a certified High Achiever. I had victoriously executed my power of choice. I chose to pursue higher learning, with a goal of earning my GED. Ten years prior, I had no intent or concern to earn my GED. Today I have reached my goal.

May 2018, Look at Me Now
CEO/Founder

Twenty years ago, I’d never thought I’d be enrolled in NYU, earning college credits. Not only am I taking college courses, I’m doing extremely well with a 4.0 GPA. In addition to studying at NYU, I’ve graduated from a very rigorous entrepreneur program where I learned about: business administration, social/business etiquette, character development, and managerial skills, just to name a few. After I graduated, I went on to become a peer facilitator for this entrepreneurial program. I applied the knowledge and have become a founder and a CEO of two businesses (Styles for Miles and a marketing and promotion corp.), which I will launch upon my release.

I look back at my past and ponder upon how far I’ve come and the distance I’m preparing to go. I oftentimes wonder where I would have been if I’d never had this prison experience. This experience has given me the time to prioritize my life, develop a new principle-centered value system, and execute positive, calculated risk-taking. I’ve utilized this time to reinvent myself. Today, I am an asset to myself, family, and my community. As Tookie Williams expressed in a New York Times interview, “Redemption was tailor-made for the wretched.”

There are so many youths out there who are falling into the grips of negative peer pressure, and there’s a lack of positive models in their lives. Their lives have become everything that’s trending within social media. They are not consciously aware that this machine is systematically dismantling their families and their communities. Too many worldly distractions have taken the attention off of how the government is using them as dispensable “pawns in the Game.”

I once experienced those same barriers in trying to make it out of the ‘hood.’ All it would have taken for me was for someone to sit me down and drop jewels on me, just be there for me genuinely. All I needed was someone to understand me. I lived most of my life by trial and error.

So, I took all of this into consideration and, in 2016, I created a program called High Achievers. I am Founder and CEO of this program. We are currently active within Wallkill Correctional Facility, performing workshops in reentry and human service areas such as: time management, effective communication, goal setting, leadership skills, and we also explore family values versus the criminal lifestyle. High Achievers is a compass to guide individuals to their inner greatness and highest potential. We aim to challenge our participants in raising the bar in their lives.

My team and I have created a curriculum tailored to meet the needs of juvenile delinquents and incarcerated and formerly incarcerated adults. I’ve resided within correctional facilities for over a decade, and I’m witnessing frivolous programs not designed to meet the needs of incarcerated individuals. Who understands the needs of juvenile delinquents and incarcerated men and women better than us? We are the incarcerated, the ones closest to the problem. We have one thing that other correctional facility programs and organizations lack, and that is experience.

High Achievers workshops identify, address, and help to resolve root issues that contributed to our incarceration. We are the “one stop” whenever it comes to rehabilitation and programming for juvenile delinquents and incarcerated individuals. This is my way of giving back.

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STRATEGIES TO ADVANCE NYU CULTURE
DARION ALLS AND RAYVON GORDON

We, Darion Alls and Rayvon Gordon, sat down to discuss “Vibe Out,” an article by Jalil Johnson, published in the Monday, November 6, 2017 Washington Square News, in which the author discussed how a Snapchat group, NYU Vibes, helped to foster greater connection between students, despite NYU’s lack of a traditional campus. As fellow NYU students, at Wallkill, we’re also looking to create broader opportunities to expand the overall NYU community, which can allow us to network and collaborate creatively. Our discussion took us through some of those community-building strategies, and also led to a discussion of the need for entrepreneurship in addition to classroom learning.

RAYVON GORDON: Hey! Did you read the article, “Vibe Out” by Jalil Johnson?

DARION ALLS: Yea!

RAYVON: What do you think of it?

DARION: The article reminded me about how it is to start a team process and the art of networking.

RAYVON: I agree with you. What I see is these guys used their creative ingenuity to find a problem and solve it, which is one of the main components to being an entrepreneur, and they also created a community across the Manhattan and Brooklyn campuses at NYU.

DARION: See, them boys got what it takes, they’re onto something! Because, as you read in the article, their first intention was to promote parties.

RAYVON: The group’s insight was on track because they used Snapchat as a vehicle to build a community. “Within a matter of months, the Snapchat group NYU Vibes has garnered over one thousand members,” writes Johnson. From my standpoint, I’d consider that pretty impressive networking.

Remember what we were discussing the other day, about building a much larger network across all NYU students, including ways for Wallkill and Washington Square students to connect?

Because our campus is within a correctional facility, there are literal barriers that make it difficult for us to communicate student-to-student with our peers at Washington Square and to build a shared NYU culture. Further, assumptions about us as convicts can throw a wedge between us. We’re looking, in the style of NYU Vibes, to help new communication patterns to emerge.

RAYVON: This publication, as well as its predecessor, Broken Silence, is one example of bringing the cultures of NYU Wallkill and Washington square together, as are the contributions I and other students made to Washington Square-based publications Washington Square News and Gallatin Review. Students have also had a chance to connect at live events.

There was an end-of-semester event at NYU Wallkill in May 2018. It served a dual role, honoring the PEP students’ achievements, including introducing the new enrollees, and it also acknowledged the Washington Square students in attendance, congratulating them on obtaining their bachelor’s degrees, and also included a student speaker from the Stern School of Business.

DARION: The students from Washington Square weren’t obligated to attend, but they gave their time and energy. This is a perfect example of the team culture of the Trilateral Formula: NYU Washington Square + NYU Vibes + Prison Education Program / NYU Wallkill.

In particular, it was inspirational to see a business undergrad speak on behalf of NYU Washington Square at the end-of-semester event. It had me wondering about degrees versus entrepreneurship.

RAYVON: What do you mean?

DARION: Once you get your bachelor’s degree and then find yourself not in the field of your choice after two years of graduating, are you prepared to take the bull by the horns and be an entrepreneur?
RAYVON: Going out into society after establishing a top-accredited education from NYU will hopefully prepare graduates to learn from mistakes through trial and error. However, book learning is proving to be less valuable in the business world, and no longer does college education guarantee a job like it once did.

To paraphrase Robert T. Kiyosaki, author of *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*, we want to stress the value of school being the beginning and not the end; you go to school to be a contributing member of society. What’s the world without its doctors, lawyers, accountants, and business people?

DARION: Statistics show that in the past, graduates from college were not in the field of their choice. I think that momentum is shifting because we have graduates and undergraduates pursuing their careers with a whole different approach and different skill set to stay in the fields of their degrees.

RAYVON: So let’s bring forth the value we represent not just as members of NYU PEP at Wallkill, but as serial entrepreneurs.

DARION: Oh, so we get to talk about how business savvy we’ve been over the years and who’s inspired us?

RAYVON: Yes, indeed!

DARION: You must be talking about Bre Pettis, CEO visionary of 3-D printing startup MakerBot, who we encountered during our quest at Voices of Defy, another program here at Wallkill, and who coached and mentored us in entrepreneurship.

RAYVON: Oh yea! This is the same guy that judged the rocket pitch that you took third place in. He’s got a spread in the *INC* magazine that shows he sold his company to Stratasys for $403 million in 2013. I learned plenty from the experiences with Defy, and it allowed me to incorporate what I learned with furthering my business ideas.

DARION: You never lied; the two years of entrepreneur training that we encountered here allowed us to take our up-and-running businesses and scale them forward. We initially launched Delectables of Atlanta, serving our one and only product at the time, exotic candy apples; however, through vigorous entrepreneurship training and networking, we managed to expand our market to venues such as University of Georgia, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, and the Fulton County State Fair.

RAYVON: Let’s not forget to mention our soon-to-be-launched company Entrege Enterprise (pronounced “Intrigue”), which caters to film, fashion, arts, music, and technology.

DARION: Now, I know we’re not going to let this Trilateral Formula slip through our hands without having a keen observation of the podcast.

RAYVON: Thanks to the imaginative mind of Sara Franklin, my Introduction to Food Studies professor, the podcast was the form for our final projects last semester, which actually was my first time experiencing the platform. We created personalized audio around the subject of foods. It was great!

DARION: Great is an understatement—this is groundbreaking. Together, with the end-of-semester events, podcasts and publications, and the online identity Assistant Director Raechel Bosch maintains on the PEP website, we can establish community with NYU Washington Square.

*We are in the Prison Education Program at NYU Wallkill hope that we’ve started a dialogue that will help us build a cohesive NYU network base that prepares us for the future as scholars, business people, and pillars of the community.*
Today, I will introduce you to a popular exercise practiced by many of the residents here in Wallkill, called “Around Da World.” Some might ask, “Why?” And I would say, “That’s a great question. Thank you for asking.” I will give you a breakdown on this prison craze that keeps many of us in good health and good shape and can do the same for you.

“Around Da World” consists of a few exercises:

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<th>REPS</th>
<th>SETS</th>
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<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>8-10</td>
<td>8-10</td>
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<td>Pull-ups (chin-ups, or whatever grip is possible)</td>
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<td>2nd</td>
<td>8-10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Push-ups (incline, decline, and flat)</td>
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<td>3rd</td>
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<td>Dips</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burpees</td>
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<td>5th</td>
<td>8-10</td>
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<td>Bodyweight squats (calves, lunges, bunny hops, etc.)</td>
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<td>6th</td>
<td>8-10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Core (sit-ups, mountain climbers, eagles, etc.)</td>
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- Whatever number of sets you plan to do, you must follow up with the same number of repetitions.
- And remember, do one through six with no rest in between.
- Then, after completing one through six, take one to two minutes of rest.
- You can start all over again, traveling around da world until completing the desired amount of exercise.

This will make you lean and build muscle, endurance, and stamina.

It’s best to have high-protein meals pre-workout and post-workout. Here is a good eating plan for your day:

**BREAKFAST**

- Oatmeal
  - Oatmeal
  - Cinnamon
  - Almond
  - Brown sugar
  - Fruit
  - Glass of milk

**LUNCH**

- Cordon Oyster Bleu:
  - Stewed tomatoes
  - Oysters
  - Dab of mayonnaise with unsalted crackers
  - Fruit
  - Protein shake:
    - Oatmeal
    - Peanut butter
    - Whey protein powder
    - Mixed nuts
    - Cinnamon
    - Bananas in hot water

**DINNER**

- Seafood Rice:
  - 1 boil-in-bag rice
  - ½ pk Sazon
  - 1 onion
  - 1 garlic clove
  - 5 sliced jalapeños
  - 1 octopus
  - 1 mackerel
  - 1 oysters
  - 1 smoked baby clams
  - A pinch of brown sugar

After a few months of following our workout and diet plan, you, too, can have a prison body like us.

**Quiz:** Name three things that improve with age.

Answer: Wine, cheese, and you.
“Trust your happiness and the richness of your life at this moment. It is as true and as much yours as anything else that ever happened to you.” —Katherine Anne Porter

QUINTIN MURRAY, EDITOR: I have been incarcerated for approximately thirteen years, and by far, I have never witnessed such a platinum opportunity as the NYU Prison Education Program (PEP) provides for men to excel in their lives. NYU PEP is truly a milestone in my life, where pure aspiration meets unlimited possibilities. The program sincerely aims to liberate incarcerated individuals, with no holds barred. This is essential for men like us who are searching for healthier lifestyles. NYU realizes that programs cannot encourage us to give up the street lifestyle without providing an alternative. Education is our alternative, and it has become our breakthrough from self-destruction. “NYU PEP has provided a social and cultural platform that is aligned with the direction that my life should have taken two decades ago,” says student Darion Alls.

What is truly amazing about this program is the trailblazing women who are carrying this program on their backs. Ms. Rachael Hudak, Ms. Raechel Bosch, and Ms. Lauren Broussard are the pillars that hold this program up. These women push past all limits to make sure we are accommodated in reaching our goals. I wholeheartedly express myself in stating that they embrace us as real family. This is a key element in how we have built such a strong community here, which makes the engagement of learning progressive and fun.

What really makes NYU PEP larger than life is the sacrifice and dedication the professors bring to the table. “I am overall appreciative and grateful to have kind and generous people that are interested in providing us with opportunities to succeed,” expresses student Rayvon Gordon. The professors go extra hard for us, and they do not allow us to settle for anything below our true worth. “Incarceration is one of the most pressing social problems of our time. We’re up against really brutal structures of injustice, and we’re all better off when we take care of each other. I have been amazed and humbled by the kindness, respect, and intellectual rigor shown by our students,” expresses Professor Kaitlin Noss.

I asked NYU professors and PEP students to participate in this group discussion so that we can chop it up about our NYU experiences here at Wallkill. Today, there will be no barriers between us, nor any lectures given. We are going to be maxing and relaxing, just getting to know each other better. Us just being us, ya dig?

Joining us from Washington Square are Piper Anderson, professor at NYU Gallatin; Julia Mendoza, PhD student and writing instructor, Kaitlin Noss, PhD student in the Department of American Studies; Andrew Ross, professor in the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis, at NYU since 1993; and Carol Tosome, director of the DSW Clinical Social Work program at NYU’s Silver School of Social Work. Wallkill NYU students are Rayvon Gordon, Miles Lewis, Jody O’Donoghue, Omar Padilla, Lew Pellegrino, Johnathan Salgado, and Quanmik Wells.

QUINTIN MURRAY (Q): I would like to thank you all for your time and effort in participating in this roundtable discussion. I understand it is summertime and you all could be at Myrtle Beach soaking up the sun sipping margaritas—well, unfortunately not all of us, but I’m sure there are other places you could’ve been, enjoying the day, but you’re here. Big yourselves up. My first question is for the professors. What inspired or motivated you all to participate in NYU’s PEP program?

DR. CAROL TOSONE: I have been teaching social work to graduate MSW students for many years and also have a private psychotherapy practice.

Q: I see you bossed up, huh. Every day you hustling. What’s it like being a BOSS?

DR. TOSONE: I found myself becoming increasingly complacent in my teaching and moving further away from the social work roots of advocacy, social justice, and work with diverse, at-risk clients.

Q: What does that look like in your eyes? What’s your bigger picture?

JULIA MENDOZA: When I first started teaching, it completely blew my world apart. I realized I am a recipient of a great amount of privilege. I received this privilege through systems of oppression. I believe it is my absolute duty as a citizen to be active in dismantling the same systems of oppression.

Q: Julia, what type of impact does this work have on you?

ANDREW ROSS: Uniquely at NYU, PEP students get a free education. That’s the way education should be. It’s not a privilege; it should be a right.

JULIA: My hope is that someday liberation education is made available to everyone.

QUINTIN MURRAY: After reading about the NYU PEP Program, I thought it would be a wonderful way to connect [with those] more directly impacted by the macro systems of our society, specifically criminal justice.

Q: Julia, what type of impact does this work have on you?
KAITLIN NOSS: I was inspired to work with PEP because I’ve learned a lot about how to organize and understand social problems from the work of prison activists. I’m honored to get the chance to learn from and with you all.

Q: Wow, that’s what’s up! Our student body definitely feels your love; that’s why we take the classes so seriously. Our peers oftentimes jokingly call NYU students “professors.” We work hard in our classes, and we just move different. We demonstrate zero tolerance for nonsense. We understand that nothing but the best of professors come through those prison doors to assist us, and we humble ourselves. We have to make that count, and it shows in our actions; it is all or nothing whenever it comes to our redemption. We represent all of you professors. We shine, you shine, we all shine together. What are some of the goals you all have in regards to NYU PEP? Is there an end you anticipate meeting?

Piper Anderson: I want to see each of my students use what they learn in the classroom to create the lives they want for themselves and make a meaningful contribution to their communities.

Andrew: To help make the program a permanent institution, and to help find a solution to underemployment on reentry.

Quanmik Wells: I want to strive toward a BA in communication, and a BS in studio/ audio engineering.

Dr. Tosone: Many of my students, some of whom entered the criminal justice system at an early age, are interested in carrying forward the life lessons they have learned while incarcerated.

Q: What aspect are you referring to?

Dr. Tosone: They aspire to work with young offenders, to be drug counselors, and to mentor adolescents at risk from a life of street crime.

Q: What’s up with you, Omar? You kind of quiet over there; what you plotting?

Omar Padilla: I’m skipping out on my LCTA to complete my associate’s degree with hopes of receiving a BA one day. NYU PEP has allowed me to see things from a different perspective and commit to an obligation, staying focused and dedicated to higher learning.

Q: For those of you who don’t know, LCTA stands for Limited Credit Time Allowance. This is an early release time allowance for qualified students.

Julia: In each class, my end goal is to create a learning space where each student realizes the true depth of their brilliancy.

Kaitlin: My goal is to contribute a high quality education experience for the PEP students.

Q: That’s super dope! For the professors, what is it that keeps you all coming in? Help me out here. We’re trying to get out, and you all keep coming in.

Piper: Knowing that every one of my students is coming home and a college education will make the transition more successful.

Andrew: My longstanding commitment to the program.

Kaitlin: This is my first opportunity to teach in PEP, but I already want to come back. I’m so impressed with the level of engagement and passion.

Julia: I love being witness to people’s learning process. It is rather humbling to experience.

Dr. Tosone: In short, the students! They are bright, inquisitive, savvy, and voracious learners who work hard and demonstrate excellent critical thinking skills.

Q: Your expertise mixed with professionalism has played a role in bringing out the best in us. If I’m not mistaken, Dr. Tosone, this is your first time teaching in a correctional facility. What was that like?

Dr. Tosone: It has been my honor and privilege, and I am learning so much.

Andrew: I was one of the original founding group that had a vision for PEP and worked to see it realized.

Q: How’d PEP come about?

Andrew: NYU was going “global” and servicing students from privileged families in other parts of the world. We wanted to do something local and serve underprivileged students here in the United States.

Q: For my fellow students, what are your responses to the professors’ comments about why they keep coming back to Wallkill?

Omar: I respect what the professors do and how much time they commit to us. They understand our underprivileged situation, so they want us to be educated so that we won’t come back to prison.

Jonathan Salgado: I believe you professors genuinely care about us and our education. You all do everything you can to give us an opportunity to move forward and succeed.

Q: Rayvon, you look deep into your thoughts. Would you mind sharing with us why you think the professors keep coming back to Wallkill?

Rayvon: I believe deep down in the professors’ hearts and minds, there’s the skepticism of our system. It’s supposedly...
based on rehabilitation, but there’s something wrong.

Q: Professors, what was it like your first time walking through prison doors? Were you caught up in the myths of prisoners being “menaces to society” or wild caged animals?

DR. TOSONE: Participating in NYU PEP has forced me to confront internalized societal notions about incarcerated persons and the prison system. The PEP students decimate negative stereotypes.

Q: Julia, Kaitlin, and Piper, this isn’t your first rodeo—you know your way around prisons. You’re at the triple OG status. Would you mind sharing with us your prison record? Where do you fit into it all?

PIPER: I’ve taught at prisons and jails in over twenty-five U.S. cities; I’m proud to have been part of the founding of PEP.

JULIA: I have taught at San Quentin State Prison since 2011 in the Prison University Project. After teaching in prisons for seven years, I’ve learned that what matters most to me is creating spaces for meaningful education.

KAITLIN: Honestly, I was surprised by the interior of Wallkill. The lobby looks like an elementary school.

Q: Say word . . . Talk about it; what does that look like?

KAITLIN: Painted fruit on the wall, wooden furniture, nice offices, and a kitchen. I think the contrast is striking.

Q: Striking—how so?

KAITLIN: I’ve learned from students that cells and other parts of the facility are dark and depressing.

Q: I plead the fifth. Well, ladies and gentlemen, the OGs have spoken. Students, at any point were you kind of leery about allowing strangers into your personal lives?

LEW PELLEGRINO: When it comes to trust issues, it’s hard because of the environment we’re in.

MILES LEWIS: I always give a stranger my trust until they break my trust.

LEW: I appreciate my professors telling me, “Don’t worry, you got this.” All I needed to do was believe in myself like they believed in me!

DR. TOSONE: By far, the most interesting thing I have learned about myself is how much I have to learn.

Q: Interesting. Dr. Tosone, would you mind telling us more about that?

DR. TOSONE: I need to learn from everyone I encounter. While it’s a well-worn cliché, it is true that NYU students have given me so much more than I have given them. Their wisdom and insights are priceless, and everyone can benefit from being in their presence.

OMAR: I’ve gained the confidence of becoming someone of great importance.

Q: So, Omar, how does that make a difference in your life?

OMAR: I’m not the person I used to be. I don’t try to impress anybody; I don’t need people around me who don’t have my best interest at heart.

Q: Quanmik, holla at ya boy. What’s your self-discovery moment, other than that finding out you’re lil Q and I’m big Q?

QUANMIK: Receiving my final grades. And group discussions.

LEW: I believe it is important to learn what truly moves you. What matters most to me is creating spaces for meaningful education. I can’t create those spaces on my own.

Q: What’s the key element to it all?

JULIA: Love and sincere commitment to learning.

Q: Anybody want to share a memorable moment or event from NYU PEP that you’ll cherish for life?

ANDREW: A long and incredibly funny story told to me by one student in class about his encounter with hillbillies. I laughed so hard I had to lie down.

MILES: Meeting the NYU President at graduation and watching a few of my friends who I started my bid with gain a college degree.

JULIA: The end-of-semester events are always bittersweet but are special memories I’ll always keep tucked away in the back of my mind.

Q: So, how do you all spend your leisure time?

JODY: I enjoy playing football, biking, video games, traveling, and cooking.

LEW: Reading, playing paddleball, and playing chess.
JULIA: Yoga, running, and laughing with my friends.

DR. TOSONE: I’m a marathon runner (eight marathons and counting).

Q: Ladies and gentlemen, oyee, oyee, the moment we’ve been waiting for. It’s now your time to share a personal brag about yourself that sets you apart from others.

PIPER: I’ve traveled to forty out of fifty states and five continents.

JODY: At the age of twenty, I had my own place and took care of myself.

JULIA: I am the tallest women in my family.

KAITLIN: I’ve been getting really good into power lifting this year, and I just broke my PR with 165-pound deadlift! Pretty exciting to me, especially since I’m 5’2” and started with an empty fifty-pound bar.

DR. TOSONE: I am the proud recipient of both the NYU Silver School of Social Work Distinguished Teaching Award and Medal.

Q: Any words of wisdom anybody would like to share with the readers or the incoming students?

PIPER: Make the most of every opportunity you have, and sometimes that requires you to sacrifice who you once were or what you’ve always believed.

DR. TOSONE: True wisdom is learning from someone else’s experience.

ANDREW: There is a Wallkill community at NYU in New York City. It’s not just part of “reentry.” The bonds between students and faculty start on the inside, in our classes at the prison, but they continue on the outside. That’s very unique.

JODY: If you want it, go get it. Knowledge means so much, but learning how to apply it is everything.

Our community here at Wallkill is irreplaceable. Everybody has a part to play, and we play them well on both ends. This session derived from the inspiration of the Wallkill student body’s belief that nobody’s hard work should go unnoticed. Credit must be given, whenever due.

This session for us to extend our gratitude was well overdue. You (NYU faculty and staff) have demonstrated due diligence in planting seeds of hope and aspiration within the depths of our lives. You will forever be deeply rooted in our success.

When others carelessly put us down, you hold us up. You came and lit a candle in the darkest space within this facility, turning it into a campus of higher learning. You’ve given us the courage to dream big, and the strength to search within ourselves, connecting the dots to manifest our dreams into reality, and for all of this, the student body of Wallkill needs for you to know, you are appreciated.

Signing off from Wallkill respectfully,
The Student Body
DARION ALLS (AKA TOXIC!), forty-seven years of age, was born in Asheville, North Carolina, and then became a transplant to Newark, New Jersey, where he was raised by “two remarkable parents, who instilled in me the energy and vitality of life at an early age.” He’s an original member and artist of Z00-CREW ENT., founded in 1991; a student at NYU; chairman of High Achievers; and a head facilitator of Defy Ventures, an entrepreneurial program. He writes, “Despite my eight-year hiatus from free society, I have still managed to build powerful relationships to enhance my successful transition back into society. Oh, can’t forget: HEY, MA! HEY, AUNTIE!! PEACE.”

RAYVON GORDON, a creative writer and aspiring entrepreneur from Queens, New York, is in his fourth semester as an NYU student. His work has also appeared in Broken Silence, The Gallatin Review, and Washington Square News. To his readers, he says, “I appreciate your interest and support. Thank you!”

GREGORY T. HEADLEY writes: “Words have power, so I have learned to use them wisely. Words are ideas turned into sound or literature. They hold the power to create or destroy, with the user’s intentions locked inside.” His writing also appears in Broken Silence and Washington Square News.

SHAQUAN HINDS (AKA PRINCEO DIAMOND) says that he writes “to extinguish the pains of my soul. Life has taken me through many ups and downs, but through all the madness, my words have elevated my mind from gone to sane.” His writing has been published in Broken Silence and Washington Square News.

ORI JOHNSON is a young songwriter trying to improve his craft. He enjoys listening to and making music, new experiences, and learning. He was a contributing editor to Broken Silence.

CERRONE LEWIS writes: “I am of an age of ongoing, like moments on-flowing. Whether here physically or spiritually, I’m in memory.”

DERICK MCCARTHY, born and raised in Laurelton, Queens, has also published in Broken Silence and The Gallatin Review, where he won the Gallatin Writing Program Prize for Prose.
QUINTIN MURRAY (AKA QUEST), writes, “I started from the bottom, now I’m here,’ representing the Dirty South full throttle. All praise is due to the Most High for all my accomplishments thus far. I’ve been incarcerated thirteen years, and prison has saved me. It was here that I found myself, my purpose in life. I’m an instrument of God, being used to help heal the world. I am a founder of High Achievers Workshop, which is a compass to guide individuals to their inner greatness and highest of potentials. I’ve found what moves me in life—helping others—and I’m living it out. Dream big and find yours; there’s no limit!”

JODY O’DONOGHUE, twenty-seven years old, is from Brooklyn, though he lived in Long Island for a couple years. Currently pursuing an associates degree, he is an entrepreneur and working on building a community.

OMAR PADILLA is a thirty-six-year-old Puerto Rican who was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. Currently studying to obtain an associate’s degree in liberal arts with NYU PEP, eventually he would love to work with at-risk youth “to show them the streets are not better than education. Education leads to many opportunities, and the streets lead either to death or prison.” He is also working on a book, Broken Hearts, which he describes as “a memoir about my crazy lyfe.”

SHAWN PETTAWAY is a poet and comedian who was born in Virginia. He thanks you for the opportunity to present his talent to the world.

JOHNATHAN SALGADO, a twenty-three year old from Queens, New York, writes: “If anyone knows the definition of messing up, I do. Having someone to lean on during tough times is vital. But through it all, I’ve learned how to use my mistakes to my advantage. I plan to show people that power is not having; it is being able to.”

AUNRAY STANFORD is a twenty-four-year-old songwriter from Bronx, New York. He is currently working on a book, Persevere, described as “painful, redemptive, and absolutely necessary.”

QUANMIK WELLS, twenty-nine years old, is an entrepreneur, with his own entertainment group called Hooked on Money ENT. Music from Wells’s company can be found on www.hookedonmoney.com. “My Big Decision” was originally written in Professor Julia Mendoza’s Spring 2018 writing seminar.