

**Writings From**

**Education  
from the  
Public to the  
Personal**

**Faculty: Tess Landon  
Summer 2017**

**Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project**



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## Personal Education Narrative

Abdul Malik Muhammad

I dedicate this essay to my mom and my dad. My mom who showed me what it means to look, to listen, and to learn. And my dad for showing me how to look and pay attention, how to listen more - talk less and how to turn what I learned into reality... I empathize with anyone that has lost parents at an early age related to an illness or violence.

As an incarcerated son and father, I sit here on my bunk and reflect back on my educational process. After so many engaged classroom discussions about school, I often realize that most educated men in prison have a misconception of the purpose of education.

Most of them assume that education should equip them with the proper instruments of exploitation so that they can someday trample over the masses. Still others suggested opposing views that education should furnish them with noble ends rather than means to an end.

For myself, it seemed to me that education has a three-fold function to perform in everyday life:

#1 The Knowledge of Self: the ability to be objective, avoid prejudices, and to search for unbiased truth.

#2 The Knowledge of Experience: the ability to love, to live, and to dream are birthed through experiences. The most dangerous minds are the people who are gifted with reason, but with no morals.

#3 The Knowledge of Academic Subjects: the ability to know how to do mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies. Most importantly, to develop the ability to think intensively and to think critically.

As I sit here, I wonder, has education fulfilled its purpose in my life?

My mom, who this essay is dedicated to, passed away shortly after my sentence due to chemotherapy complications. This loss

was even more catastrophic than the passing of my dad at the age of 7 a day before I was to turn 8.

My earliest memory of learning would be when my parents taught me how to spell my name, Abdul Malik Muhammad, at the age of three. Everyone jokingly suggested I would have difficulty learning to pronounce and spell such a long and lengthy name. But there's a blessing in every curse.

I was blessed with a photographic memory and an uncanny ability to mimic just about anything I see. To say I picked up things fast faster than an average three-year-old would be an understatement. I was more advanced than the average three-year-old my age, my parents often told me. Learning at a rate twice as fast.

I excelled in school, became a bridge-builder for friends who needed to connect with something when their parents became preoccupied with other things that left them with so many distractions. Unfortunately, this is the case which explains why there so many high school dropouts. By my junior year of high school, unfortunately, I became a victim of the same set of circumstances. I dropped out. My mom's only solution to fix me was sending me to military school.

Military school trained me to think quickly, resolutely, and effectively. Skills that you surely need living in a big city like Chicago. Unlike military school which had all different nationalities from African Americans, White Americans, Latin Americans, Hispanic Americans, Italian Americans, Irish Americans, Jewish Americans, and me, a Muslim American, the schools back in Chicago were segregated, as though we never left the plantation.

The school system itself felt more like an indoctrination tool, so for me, I believe the true value of my education can never be understood from a classroom perspective, or discovered in a discussion, nor found hidden away in a textbook. But more so understanding how to navigate the streets of Chicago.

Have you ever heard the saying "it takes a village"? Well, when you live in this segregated city, your family, friends, and Community come together to educate you on how to survive... Chicago. They teach you to detach yourself from what you learned in school and

to free your mind to think freely outside the box. Chicago school curriculum was playing games with my mind. I felt forced to learn the pledge of allegiance, to sing the songs of the United States of America, the National Anthem, and to accept the idea that the policeman was “officer friendly.”

The first stages of the indoctrination process I clearly disagreed with, because I knew my identity, my nationality, and the Chicago Streets taught me about urban mythologies so I new so-called “officer friendly” wasn’t all that friendly in my community at all. I learned at an early age that the Chicago Police Department was responsible for killing a majority of our black activists, locking up our community leaders, and using the mantra “to protect and serve” as a political agenda to the media. And those early lessons were things my teachers didn’t teach me, things I learned on my own through life experiences, which altered my very own interpretation about the world we live in and those things I was able to identify with, to spark a feeling to explore, create, and dream outside the curriculum, no matter where I attended school.

From 1st grade through 10th grade, I attended around three of the most undesirable schools a parent would want to send their kid to. Each school had a large class size and different methods they used to teach me. In all honesty, I learned more from the students in these classrooms than I actually learned from the teachers who were getting paid to teach me. In every classroom and school I attended the curriculum was the same. I had to learn on my own how to analyze and read the books in the same way I read individual personalities, styles, trends, behaviors, and emotions on the streets.

It takes all kinds of people to make the world go round. The same way it took so many presidents to make America great. My uncle came home from the joint and he became a fruitful teacher to my growing young mind. He taught me that the majority of the founding fathers of America were worthless alcoholics who owned and purchased black slaves. He also taught me biology, chemistry, and a little about banking. If you haven’t guessed it, he’s part of the exception of the wealthiest 10% living in the hood. A drug dealer with the mindset to run a Fortune 500 company.

I grew up different than most of my peers and my curious mind wondered why. But before I could figure it out, I was picked up by “officer friendly,” I was tortured by him, and wrongfully imprisoned for a crime I did not commit. I entered prison at 19 years old with a 50 year sentence at 100%. I read countless books to pass the time. I’ve read urban novels and book about urban studies and the Black Liberation movement. I earn my GED and carpentry certificates within eight years of my wrongful imprisonment. Somewhere in between that time and right now I’ve become what you would call “institutionalized.” Prison teaches you how to survive time. I had to learn basic prison rules that were common sense to most prisoners but weren’t all that common sense to me since I’d never been in prison before.

The five most common rules you will learn:

#1 Never put too much trust in anyone.

#2 Be suspicious about any exaggerated act of kindness.

#3 Never speak to a prison guard right after an incident.

#4 Never borrow and place yourself in a prison debt.

#5 Never reveal an emotional trait and take things

too personally.

After learning so many unspoken prison rules, you become institutionalized. If it wasn’t for PNAP I don’t know what my mind-set would be socially. I’m thankful for each PNAP teacher that has helped me to improve my growth and development in higher learning. A special thanks to Alice Kim for introducing me to Ai Weiwei, a community activist in China, to Dr. Beth Richie who introduced me to social injustice and the myth of gender roles and responsibilities, to Tess Landon for introducing me to learn more about the social values of ethnic studies, and last but not least, to Sarah Ross for introducing me to so many guest speakers and people who are like-minded in prison with me because for years mentally I have felt alone amongst a lost population of men. I would also like to include a special thanks to Anna Martine Whitehead who taught me the meaning of African dances such as the jig, the bug, and ring shout. Thanks for educating me on the meaning of dance.

In conclusion, a poem: I tried my best to explain my educational process and how it affected the life I've had and now I'll let you be the judge of whether the process was good or bad. Please listen carefully to the lessons I've learned and maybe you will understand that what I learned was hard earned. I was raised a man-child without the promised land, and educated myself because the teachers didn't give a damn. I was always without a positive voice, so the streets were my first school, and to figure it all out and make it out the hood, was the only real rule.

Thank you for giving me this moment to be...thankful gleeful and grateful...for my life.

Sometimes jail do not break you...sometimes it unites you... sometimes it teaches you things...sometimes it teaches you how to learn to love, to live, and to dream again...sometimes.

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## From Now Compared To Then...

Allen Johnson

Through the harsh reality of my childhood, I endured through the struggle.

Moving from school to school every year was not only damaging, it deeply had an impact on everything I had seen and done growing up. Adjusting was an action this Harlem native had left to manage. Throughout the drug abuse, fighting, screaming, and lack of education in my household, I honestly am grateful to have made it this far. It was too difficult to come into the 16th floor housing apartment from school, no one home but two junkie uncle's passed out from a large heroin dose, empty refrigerator, and the smell of marijuana and cigarettes lingering against the walls.

I begin to unload my bookbag, take the last drink of Kool-Aid, and begin to do my homework and try my best to finish it without quitting because of complex word problems. I would usually manage to finish before everyone got home and the yelling and confusion took over the environment.

This routine became schedule, but yet seemed normal. After doing my school work I'd run down 16 flights of steps to the backyard to play basketball and be a kid unguided by an adult. I tried my best to do good until poverty and hunger set in...that's when I had to do whatever it took to eat.

The corner bodegas were where I stole candy and junk food to subside the pain of hunger. Once I turned 13 and realized that selling drugs would improve my attire and way of living, is when I went to my older friends in my building and ask them to let me work for them and that's when the love of money took over and I never took a single look backwards! This was a lifelong bad choice.

With no one to put me in my place the street began to take full possession of this once innocent little kid. Bringing dividends home was what kept mom from beating and yelling me, and the fact that I was bigger than her 4 foot 11 inch frame played a part in her letting me do what I wanted.

I was fortunate to never get caught by police selling drugs. By 11th grade I moved to Irvine, California to live with my cousin and his mom, my strictest aunt!

My aunt applied rules and stability, something I never had so it was completely difficult to live by at first. After a couple months I became a basketball star for Irvine High School, and that's when my life changed. That's when I was able to get the educational support in order to finish my high school journey. I passed with straight A's and finished high school without a problem.

I left for New York and that was the last of Irvine, California, the best and most beautiful place I've ever been to. I got married and had a beautiful little girl and worked full time for a construction company and had a nice apartment in Long Island, New York with my Italian wife Tanya.

As I began to save money, and going out with "the guys" at age 21 the temptation of being with other girls came into play and sucked me right away and cost me my family, and soon after, my job. Unfaithful to myself, and others, was what played me and cost me my freedom.

I was forced to move to Rockford, Illinois where my mom now lives. With my pain, I drowned it out by going back to my old ways are selling drugs again. Fast money brought lots of girls and with that lifestyle, I brought two little girls and two little boys into the world. With 3 different girls pregnant, drama came and then shortly after, this lengthy incarceration.

Today I choose to use my good heart, and critical thinking, and apply it to bettering myself and doing my best to assist my children who I selfishly left out there alone to live without my presence.

I once believed (for years) that having no role model and no one to love me for who I was was the gateway for my diabolical ways of living and thinking. However, it wasn't until I was given many years of a sentence by a Rockford judge and stuck in Stateville, watching my loving children growing older, when I knew I had to become someone better than I have been.

Once I evaluated myself, that's when critical hope and thinking came about and I promised myself I'd give my heart to every

positive choice I make. Since then I've completed four PNAP courses, I've worked the same job for 5 years, my relationship with my 21 year old daughter and other children couldn't be better, and well I'm completely applying myself to these wonderful PNAP courses, great things continue to pour upon me!

Now that PNAP has blessed me to expand my intellect, I know I'm obligated to thank the faculty for giving me the option to improve and grow, as well as help me to share and apply what was taught to me to my teenage children who hunger for their father's learning experiences, as well as wisdom.

I'm growing so much confidence in my abilities now that I'm in PNAP. Tess Landon by far has been the strongest instructor for me. Her ability to guide us and assist us through our doubts and our questions are outstanding. Hers is one of the strongest attributes. Teaching. And not only that, Tess has showed me how to stay poised and focused even when an inmate becomes irate with his comments or aggressiveness or becomes defensive because of their low self-confidence or lack of communication all balance. I've learned so much from her and I'm completely honored and humbled by this workshop experience.

With that being said, I would like to give all my respects to our instructor for summer course, as well as Ms. Sarah Ross and the rest of the PNAP faculty!

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## Personal Education Narrative

Andre Patterson

“If it’s not the right to get married, then what do the LGBT community want?” It was an earnest enough question, I felt, on my part. I would eventually find out that it was a typical question, posed by those who thought they were open-minded, but still filled with bias.

It was my first PNAP class, “History of Social Movements in America,” taught by a complementary duo, Erica Meiners and Jilly Petty. Erica, a white woman with an eccentric cockatoo type hairstyle and an androgynous swag, was the fiery, outspoken, “fight the power” type; while Jill, a black woman with a kind, round face, was more quiet and reserved in her delivery. But just as passionate, just is awake. They had an effective one two pick-and-roll game that worked because Erica, a natural ball hog, calculate so that Jill could get her buckets.

It was Erica who I discreetly directed my question towards, in writing at the end of one of my homework assignment. She had drifted off into one of her spontaneous, side rants, about the recent so-called “victory” of gay marriage being allowed in certain states. In my naivete I thought this was a good thing for the community, the culmination of many highly-publicized protest and lobbying. But for some reason Erica didn’t seem impressed, and I couldn’t decipher why through her “screw the man” rhetoric.

Now, any other time, if I had a burning question, I would be so bold to ask it, no matter how controversial, or uninformed, it made me seem. But this was an uneasy situation for me. There had been speculation as to whether or not Erica was gay. But regardless of a strong consensus in the affirmative by us students, the homophobic attitudes still reared their ugly, shrunken heads whenever the topic was brought up; there was no sensitivity. As a matter of fact, it was an eye-opener to see our collective change with each topic that challenged our conditioned mindsets. Like feminism, for example. After hearing some of the resistance of feminism as a movement, I had to

question, do us so-called “conscious black men” respect women as we claim?

Up to that point, I'd been playing respectability politics and hiding the fact that I was experiencing any shift in consciousness concerning the issue of homosexuality. “Bruh!” I would chastise the offenders after class, “you know these people come way out here and sacrifice they time to bring us these classes... You got to be P.C when you talk about this stuff, you going to offend ol’ girl!” One guy, who was the class clown and identified as an Afrikan Hebrew Israelite, looked at me with big, goofy eyes and a dumb grin and said, “I’m s’posed to censor what I believe because she’s a homosexual?” (Let me just add that we probably weren’t as respectful with the descriptions we used.)

I knew I was kicking against a brick wall, so I usually played the buffer and tried to steer clear of anything that would spark any crass comments. So I asked my question in secret. “What is the LGBTQ community fighting for, if it’s not the right to get married?” The answer, when I read it, seemed elementary. Why hadn’t it been obvious to me in the first place? Erica had responded, “The fight is for normalcy...to not be considered an ‘other.’” So simple, yet so profound in its impact on how I viewed LGBTQ after that. Wasn’t it a reasonable request? My ancestors, the descendants of Afrikans, had been fighting for this very thing since the narrative of an “other” had been created. Not to mention other ethnic groups the world over who have, and continue to be, subject to colonialism, orientalism, racism, etc.

People who didn’t fit society’s gender and sexual norms, where people. They were human beings. Everything I’ve been taught up to that point was contrary. My patriarchal, eurocentric religious education taught me that it was a sin, something that one can be saved from, cured from as if disease. Even once I moved away from this patriarchal belief system, everything thereafter believed the same. It’s an unnatural thing.

Now, in this hyper-masculine prison culture, I find myself in the closet, so to speak. But I’m not completely innocent because in the midst of constant slurs of “fag,” “punk,” “sissy,” “chump,” “gump”...I

find myself silently complicit. Even still, as I cringe when I hear these hateful words, I myself cringe when I see what I perceive as an “effeminate” man on television, an image I’m still conditioned to feel isn’t a normal portrayal of masculinity.

After the social movements class was over, I continue to take more PNAP courses. After I left each one I found my paradigm-shifting beneath me like tectonic plates. Ideas I had about race, gender, masculinity, nationalism, rights, freedom; each one a nice congruent box I had cozily snuggled in, all turned out to be made of glass.

I don’t know what to do with these new ideas. Apprehension almost killed the admissions in this essay. I have a slight fear of brothers I’ve been in the struggle with for decades ostracizing me. Black nationalist, Muslims, Hebrews, 5 percenters, Moores, Kemetic scientists, all swinging on a pendulum from one extreme to another. Never considering that maybe reality isn’t a spectrum like we’ve been taught. It just might be a continuum. I learned that from Erica.

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## The Journey So Far... (My Education)

Antonio Jones

My mother was my first instructor. As an infant and then toddler, she would introduce me to so many things: a bowl, bottle, cup, spoon. As I grew, she noticed that I had a very good memory, due to my memorizing the ABCs she taught me. By 11 months of age, I knew the alphabet. By age 2, my mom had taught me how to read, to spell, and to memorize some of her college work. When she would need to recall it, she would ask me and I would recite it for her. Those times gave me a profound sense of accomplishment and started my lifelong love of learning.

By age 3, my formal education began with daycare and preschool. During this time I was instructed in the alphabet, shape and color recognition, and preliminary ethics and morals. By age 5 I was able to read, spell, write, add, and subtract, thanks in large part to my mom. Needless to say, I was ahead of the curve as I headed into kindergarten. From kindergarten through 8th grade, I excelled academically. This trend continued in high school. I was always a straight A student. I won spelling bees, received numerous year-end awards, and stayed on the honor roll.

Heading into high school, my informal education began to supercede the formal. From my earliest memories I was inundated with violence, aggression, drug use and sales, gang culture, and war. Yes, war. I was raised in a thriving crack house--a home where crack cocaine was manufactured and sold, along with other drugs. My entire family except my mother was gang affiliated and involved in criminal activity. By 6 years of age, I had sold drugs, smoked marijuana, and seen people shot. I was inside my home when it was peppered with bullets from a drive-by shooting. I'd witness people being robbed, brutalized, exploited, and murdered.

My informal education played a central role in my ultimately ending up being incarcerated at age 17 for murder. I learned to be extremely violent and aggressive. I learned to manipulate people for my own ends. I learned that you never show mercy or weakness--it

can cost you your life. I learned to trust no one, to only rely upon myself. These lessons, though cruel, allowed me to survive in a gang and crime infested home and neighborhood. Some still serve me well inside prison.

Upon my incarceration I was faced with a dilemma: continue wasting my life attempting to excel in street culture or resume my education and better myself. I straddled the fence for years, alternating between gangs and the school offered in the jail. Finally, at age 21, I received my GED. Unfortunately, my formal education halted at that point due to the jail not offering any college courses.

For several years thereafter, I took responsibility for my own education. This resumed my informal education, but now of a different kind. I chose to now sharpen and expand my intellect. I began to consume as much knowledge as I could, no matter the topic. I withdrew from my former associates and began to study and read voraciously. I recall the first book I read, *Blood in My Eye* by George Jackson. This book had a profound impact on me. It engendered a sense of cultural and social responsibility inside me that is with me to this day. It was also my first introduction to the ideologies of communism and nationalism. The next book I read was *Biology 101*, an introductory textbook for high school level biology. This book was revelatory as well. I learned about mitosis, meiosis, protons, neutrons, and atoms. I learned about the makeup of animal, plant, and human physiology.

I continued to pursue my own intellectual edification for years. I studied science, physics, debate, ethics, politics, religion, history, long-term planning, and more. As my intellect broadened, I came to this realization: no matter how much knowledge I accumulated, I still didn't know enough. Every day is an opportunity to grow, evolve, and expand my miniscule amalgamation of knowledge. Life has taught me the value of education and that to know better is to do better. Being educated is not based solely upon scholarship or vocation. Being educated is also about becoming more human--to be ever mindful of that humanity and all its prerequisites. I've learned that ignorance dehumanizes, poverty dehumanizes, oppression dehumanizes. I learned these lesson experientially, and have since

made if part of my life's work to divest myself of their bitter fruit. In this sense, my education has been redemptive--taking me from ignorance, tyranny, and self destruction to awareness, acceptance, and love.

My formal education began once more at the age of 34, here in Stateville prison. One of my peers told me about these great classes being offered down here through the Prison and Neighborhood Arts Project. He told me about the amazing, dynamic instructors who were teaching these class. He told me about their drive, compassion, and sincerity. His words inspired me to sign up for PNAP classes.

My first PNAP course was a dance class. It was transformative. The class took me completely outside of my comfort zone and forced me to stretch, not only intellectually but also with regard to my self-esteem. My instructor taught me so much more than mere dance steps and stretches. She taught me to be comfortable in my own skin. She taught me to asses my body, energy, space, time, and opportunity more critically. She taught me to be open to new, and sometimes uncomfortable, situations. Because life is like that, right? Always something new, different, or challenging. I can now embrace the unknown with a more confident approach. I never though in a million years that I'd be caught dead doing choreography. Yet, not only did I do it, I did it front of an audience of my peers and PNAP faculty. I can thank my instructor and PNAP for that.

My second PNAP course was Black Studies. This class was superb. The reading and assignments were very challenging. Our class discussions were vigorous, to say the least. This class dealt with the genesis and evolution of black studies, posing questions such as: Should Black Studies be taught solely in universities? Or in elementary and secondary schools as well? Who should determine the curriculum? Should Black Studies be mandatory or elective? Due to questions like these, and the discussions that ensued, I was able to examine some long held beliefs, to refine some, and discard others. Our instructor allowed us to be critical of one another's ideas while fostering mutual respect and intellectual camaraderie.

My most recent PNAP class was a writing workshop, with a focus on education and the political issues surrounding it. I felt

that this class would help refine my writing prowess, as a budding poet, philosopher, and intellectual. The class was far more than I expected. My instructor believes in what she speaks about, and she matches that with her actions. Her attitude encourages me as a student to apply myself fully to the curriculum. I hope that she can learn from me a fraction of what I've learned from her.

The PNAP program is revolutionary. These awesome teachers use academics, humanities, and the arts to imbue hope and light into this dark, dismal prison landscape. PNAP allows individuals such as myself, who are incarcerated, the means and opportunity to embark upon a journey of critical self-discovery that can lead to restoration. PNAP has been more than I could have fathomed and I continue to flourish in this inclusive, rigorous, and challenging environment. In this environment I am not only free, but also encouraged to think for myself. I think critically to create something that will transcend my current circumstance. I am encouraged to change the world.

Education is a light. Light illuminates, it disables obscurity and ignorance. It exposes paths to understanding and enlightenment that push us to strive for a better future. A future of community and hope. A future where we all recognize our uniqueness, while simultaneously recognizing our myriad similarities. Education can be that scrying glass that we use to show us who we are and all that we can be. I will steadfastly continue to avail myself of the opportunity to illuminate the darkness of my heart and mind. I will happily utilize the resources that PNAP provides, recognizing that the most vital and valuable resources are our PNAP instructors. From these instructors I have learned courage, selflessness, dedication, and moral and intellectual tractability. My education is a lifelong journey. And as such, I will measure my steps with a critical eye, discriminating forever in favor of growth, evolution, and above all else, equality and enlightenment.

This is my journey so far...to be continued!

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## Education Timeline

Daniel Scott

In the summer of 1977, my family headed West from East St. Louis, Illinois, groping for the elusive “California Dream.” Instead of Hollywood glitz, we landed in the war-torn Watts District where Crips and Bloods struggled to control every square inch. Nightly shootouts acquainting my nostrils with the aroma of gunsmoke. Early morning treks to kindergarten introduced my eyes to shell casings strewn about the sidewalk. The Watts sector taught me to beware.

In around 1981, an integration program bussed my big sister Shannon and I to McKinley Elementary in Suburban Paramount California. McKinley taught me the awesome power words convey. They’re gagged edge that cuts the heart and scars the soul. At McKinley, a predominantly white school, the student body intimately acquainted my sister and I with a word I’d never heard before: nigger.

The white students transformed bus rides to school each morning into a torture chamber. I remember sitting slumped in my seat while the white bus driver, a lady in her mid-thirties, led the students in a chilling chorus: “a fight, a fight, a nigger and a white. The nigger can’t fight but the white’s alright!” When the word nigger cut into my ears and pierced my brain, I realized that I didn’t belong with white children. The feeling of being out of place made me to sink further into social obscurity. I withdrew socially to defend my pride from the potential of another unprovoked assault on my confidence. McKinley welcomed me into a sick, racist world.

Instead of shooting marbles in the dirt during recess, my sister and I volleyed fistcuffs with white students for respect. Every victory, in my mind, felt like winning a championship trophy for the Black Nation. We stuck together like a peanut butter sandwich. My big sister kept me tucked under her wing like a hen shielding her chick from the treacherous elements. But a wolf lurked in the thicket, shrouded in pale skin and a cheap smile. She were a plus

size frame, manufactured curly hair ending just below the nape of her neck, and a set of black glasses. My big sister couldn't protect me from the big bad wolf, Ms. Gordon, my second grade teacher.

One day, Ms. Gordon, taking advantage of my mathematical ineptitude, caught me in her evil snare. She lured me into an after-school setting and sat me behind another student who also had difficulty counting money. Following the instructions to never leave me behind, Shannon poked her head into the room and said, "Daniel, come on! We're gon' miss our bus!" Ms. Gordon leapt her feet and slammed the door in her face, caring nothing about my only way home. She returned to the table and shoved the paper under my nose demanding I get it right. I trembled at the prospect of the consequences if I didn't. I had seen her throw my friend Marcus, one of the only other black students, clear across the room for a minor brain freeze. Another time, she snatched an Asian kid by the hair, shook him like a pit bull, and tossed him aside like dirty laundry. I feared a wrong answer might ignite similar results. A roulette of variables rolled around in my head. I wrote down my best guess and said a prayer. A long pause encouraged a glimmer of hope. Then suddenly I felt a wind gust, saw a flash of light, and felt a palm crack my face like a whip. My taste buds flew across the room. Tears roll down my cheeks, forming a puddle on the table.

By the time Ms. Gordon dismissed me, our school bus had long gone. I never told anyone. Ms. Gordon taught me to never trust anyone with my children - not even teachers.

When the 7th grade hit me at Bancroft Junior High, I hit back. Harder. Disinterested in the curriculum, I laser beamed my attention on to the Compton streets - the epicenter of gang activity and the wanton violence it breeds. I picked up my bandana and found refuge among my homeboys, who like me, also felt out of place in a white man's world. Homeboys, who like me, saw no value in the education system. The only value we saw in ourselves dependent on the amount of work put in to clarify the gang.

I took up Survival 101 - a curriculum that included studying geographical boundaries held sacred by the hundreds of sets peppered throughout the Los Angeles basin. One misstep across

enemy turf routinely triggered a round of applause from gun claps aim to kill. I took up the arts, etching graffiti on walls, which served as ghetto newspapers, broadcasting contemporary wars and highlighting the names of reputable warriors who fought, bled, and died in battle.

As I reflect on my education, I found that it had nothing to do with the schools the system designed to educate me. An education designed to indoctrinate me into neo slavery, slavery of my mind.

Though I take no pride in my street education, it was a necessary experience that prepared me for my prison experience where I'm forced to pursue the right kind of education. The streets made me tough. They taught me how to thrive in adversity. They taught me how to not give up.

I realized the height of my education while in prison, because my very life depends on it. I had to educate myself in the law because with it I'd forge petitions, briefs, and arguments necessary to convince a judge to overturn my wrongful conviction. I had to educate myself in religion because the system used it to enslave my ancestors and continue to divide and conquer. In doing so I found the common thread uniting all religions which enables me to unite with people from all walks of life.

Uniting humanity must be the aim of education.

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## A Lesson Well Learned

Decory Franklin

I learned the greatest lesson that any young man without a dad could learn at the age of 8 while in third grade.

I was born in the projects of Cabrini Green, the worst projects known to Chicago. My grandmother raised all of her kids and grandkids up until her death. As a small boy, I had a big appetite and I wanted everything that I saw that was edible. You know, the always hungry fat kid story. Well, being that I had over 15 family members houses I could go to in one building, I didn't see any harm going door to door and eating, and because I was family they didn't see anything wrong with feeding me. Plus, I was my grandma's favorite and they knew not to deny me because my grandmother didn't play when it came to her grandkids or kids, especially me. My grandmother protected me from everyone, all the drug addicts in the house, alcoholics, and even the pushers. My grandma was my protection, my angel. If I cried, she came. If I coughed, she came. All I had to do was signal. My mom was always with us but it didn't matter to me because my grandmother had me. Although my family was dysfunctional, we loved one another. But deep down I always felt that nobody loved me like my grandma.

I think I was between six and seven years old when my grandmother died. All I know is that since that day life has been truly heartbreaking and the pain has not stopped yet. Just writing this has made me emotional. After my grandmother's funeral my mother decided to tell the family about a surprise move which no one could understand because we were so close and plus my mom was the baby out of eight kids. This left me further in shock because I had to leave behind life as I knew it at the age of seven and there was no choice. From one project to another we moved, from the north side of Chicago to the south side Robert Taylor Homes, which were not homely. My mom had three boys but she brought with her a little more baggage than we had room for. She brought four extra adults and five extra kids, plus us that's 13 people in a three bedroom

apartment. The only difference in the projects were the first ones were red and white, these just white.

School was a two minute walk and there was a restaurant across the street from our building. There was also a candy truck next to the school which helped me cope on plenty of occasions. Because I was the new kid, I started to get picked on by the older guys in the building and this was new to me because no one would have ever taunted me or pestered me if my grandma was around. This made me withdraw from going out other than when I had to, and it got worse when the actual school year started. I was in third grade at a new school, a new neighborhood, with a bunch of new kids that I didn't know. It started off slow, you know, the new kid shuffle. Then it progressed to much more than picking on the new, fat kid. I began to ditch school because of the taunting and bullying. I used to come home like everything was alright, too scared to say something because my uncle and cousins would tease me even more and punch on me if they knew I allowed some kids to bully me. It would never be the last of it for me.

I don't know what was different this day besides me having to take a shit real bad. On this day the kids decided they would follow me home egging on a fight between me and a sixth grader known to everybody as Big Red. I was in a real rush because I had to use it so he threw rocks at my head, little baby pebbles, and pushed me down when he got up closer. I thought for a moment, this is just what I needed, to not only get chased home but to shit myself in front of these guys. Oh my God, this would kill me. As I made it to the building I thought they would leave. I had just 10 stairs to climb and I climbed them faster than I ever did, not because of the boys but because of my bowels. I made it to my door, twisted the knob, and the door was locked. Yes, locked. Our door only gets locked at 9 p.m. but for some reason today it's locked. I'm not even paying any attention to the bullies outside my door who are still trying to fight.

I'm banging to get in and then I get punched. And all hell broke loose. I heard someone unlocking the door and so did they. They tried to run but I chased them. I don't know how but I caught Big Red. To this day I don't know how. But it was great. I punched him

and kept punching him until his nose bloodied up and he started crying with all the rest of his followers looking on. You ever see A Christmas Story? Exactly the same thing. My mom remove me from the sixth grade bully and took me in the house to call me down. I felt so good. I no longer had to use the washroom and I just beat up and made cry the biggest kid in my school. Little did I know this was my initiation into the street hustle and crime sprees taken on daily.

The next day when I got to school, no jokes, nobody ganging up to crack jokes, people actually speaking to me, girls walking up to me to talk. I was in heaven, and it only got better. The kids that hung out with Big Red now wanted hang out with me. And even Big Red was trying to hang out with me because I had become their new leader and didn't even know it. But it felt good. We ditched school, stole from stores, fought other crews, and because I was the leader I always threw the first punch and they loved that I was a gangster. And they followed my lead, but little did they know I was leading a game I didn't want any part of, by default I was there. I began to do the same things to others that they were doing to me for no apparent reason. I would slap, kick, and punch others only to satisfy these people's cravings for drama. And even though I knew it was wrong, something down in me wouldn't allow me to stop. I was self medicating off of food and violence and I couldn't stop.

I began hanging out with much older kids who were into smoking weed, cigars, cigarettes. They were even drinking and selling drugs. The little shit I was doing didn't have nothing on these guys and I wanted in, and in I got. They liked me from the jump. I had girls, I fought, I had hustle, and unbeknownst to me my dad was the baddest gangster that ever walked these streets predating Larry Hoover. For as much as I wanted to be a part of their crew, they wanted to be a part of mine because they thought this would give them the direct line to my father. I never knew he was in the streets, maybe because he didn't come around that often and when he did it was just to give us money, a lot of money, but no attention, no love, just a what's up and a handshake or a drop off to his mother's house where we would stay an occasional weekend or two.

Things had really started to get bad. My mom was never home, plus there were too many people in the house. I wanted to be grown and I started really acting out. Assaulting adults, using drugs and alcohol, not to mention food. I could barely concentrate let alone keep up in school. And my bullying turned into rage and my rage was misdirected on any and everyone. My mom didn't even know how that the every other weekend seeing my family was not working and that my grandma dying had really taken a toll on me. And on top of that, this neighborhood. I hated it.

One day I woke up with a massive headache and I thought maybe I needed to smoke some weed, so I did, and I was high but it didn't help so I took two Advils and went to school. Little did I know when I got to school there would be an angry mother at the school ready to chew my head off. But when she saw me get out of one of the gang leader's cars and shake his hand, that sight just made her walk off. When I got inside the school after the bell rang I didn't even feel like going to class but I forced myself to, reeking of weed and brute cologne. Once in the class my head only began to hurt worse so the teacher sent me to the nurses station where I was given a couple of Tylenol and she allowed me to lay on the cot in the back.

I was good up until the coolest teacher known to our district came in there and he smelled the weed on me and everything. He had been knowing me since I first started at the school and he pleasantly ask the nurse if he could speak with me for a second. She obliged. Now, Mr. Coleman was a very large guy in size. He dressed clean and kept himself up and he was funny as fuck, which made everyone like him. He pulled a seat up and asked me what was wrong with me. I started to explain. He said, "no, what is wrong with you?" And I said, "I have a headache," and he said, again, "no, what's really wrong with you?" I told him I didn't understand his question. He said I had let myself go because of my own insecurities and that I allowed a system to change my whole entire being to where now I am a statistic. He told me he used to be big when he was little and he had some of the same problems, but the difference between us was that he ignored the booze and it got to him to where

he was. He said me, on the other hand, had allowed someone to fix my future. Then came this statement, which I live to by to this day. He said, fat is not your character nor your image. It is only a perception of you and if you allow people to put you in a category in order to fit in now then you would be doing it all your life. And he closed it with this: don't allow the fatness of the world dictate your waist size or your character, for those people of tomorrow will only remember you for today. Words to live by.

And that is my lesson and my education.

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## Personal Education Narrative

### Derrick Parks

It was the year 1975, and I had just turned 5 years old. At that age everything is brand new and exciting. Every time I left the house it was an adventure for me, so any opportunity to explore a new place or environment was welcome. Little did I know, my new journey would take me down the rabbit hole of the American public education system, specifically in Kalamazoo, Michigan public schools. There I would learn how to read and write.

I can't really remember too much else, though my mom assures me I was a good student in those formative years. All I can recall is the school field trips we went on and enjoying these adventures. My first educational curiosity outside of school came to me at around eight years old. This experience came from an after-school program that was offered to the kids of all ages who lived in our neighborhood.

African American cultural centers were where they taught black love, black heritage, and black consciousness. Most parents sent their kids to these cultural centers because they were free, kept kids off the streets, and were safe places for kids to go, not to mention you got to learn that black was beautiful, so it was okay for me to love my black beautiful self. These are things that up until that moment I didn't know and didn't know I needed to know, hear, or believe.

None of my teachers taught self-love at the school I attended. There happened to be a biracial student body at the school, but most of the kids who went there were white. And all the teachers were white, now that I think about it. That's probably why they didn't feel the need to go the extra mile, and help their black students to see their Blackness as an attribute and not a handicap in life.

My time spent attending the cultural center in my neighborhood only lasted through the fall of the year 1978. Still, the overall message they promoted in the cultural centers back then stayed

with me all these years later and has helped me to know my own self worth as a man, a human being, and child of God.

Two years after 1978, my family would relocate to East St. Louis, Illinois. For me this would be another new adventure. In the beginning it was a real adjustment because I was the new student at the new school. Plus, the entire School District 189 for the city was comprised mainly of African-American students and teachers. This was a new experience to me because the schools I attended Kalamazoo, Michigan had a biracial make up. When it came to the curriculum being taught, some of the lessons they were learning at the 5th and 6th grade level were things they had already taught me at the school I attended in Kalamazoo. Being forced to relearn the same material I already knew can be uninspiring in a school setting. Because of the disparity that I saw in the curriculum being taught I knew that on some level there was a difference between white and black schools

That said, I still managed to graduate from fifth and sixth grade with A's and B's. So I was more than ready to start attending King Junior High School. This is where I would meet two amazing teachers. The first teacher is Ms. Henderson and she was my English teacher. She was someone who enjoyed teaching and did it very well. Even though I did have a secret crush on Ms. Henderson, what I liked about her was how she made me fall in love with writing, and reading too. She made the written word seem so romantic and yet so alive.

There was also another teacher that had a large influence on me. His name was Mr. Smith and he was my science teacher. He taught me that science was the key to unlocking every mystery under the sun because all the known secrets of the universe can be discovered through science. As long as you're willing to keep looking, you never know what you might find. It was the things I learned in Ms. Henderson and Mr. Smith's classes which help me to continue to define my educational foundation. While my formal school education has been a major part of the learning curve for me, my education was also shaped by the streets, prison, and everyday living. All these things have contributed to the man I've become

over the years. Since I've lived my life in a manner that I've always been a student seeking to learn. But, as I look back on my life during my junior high school years, I can see how the path I took put my life in a different direction than my parents had planned.

You see, the choices we make today can still reverberate tomorrow, which is what happened to me one late fall day at King. It all began with a fight in the school cafeteria at lunchtime. Seems me and another student was involved in a fight with each other. During the course of the fight someone made the mistake of grabbing me to break up the fight and my reaction to being grabbed was not taken too kindly since the person I was fighting took advantage and got some extra kicks in, which again made the situation worse because of my reaction. Especially considering I attacked the person who grabbed me. But just my luck it turned out to be the wrong move on my part since the person who grabbed me was the school principal. And you can imagine how the rest of the story played out. I got expelled from King Junior High School for the remainder of the school year.

It just so happens my parents were not happy about this outcome and they let me know it by the severity of my punishment. Because they both worked and couldn't afford staying home to watch me, my mom took a couple of days off to find another school to enroll me in. Long story short she found a school that was willing to allow me to enroll. The school was close to where my grandfather lived and it got me out of the house, which is what my parents wanted and I really had no say in the matter. The school was Clark Junior High School and the vibe was unique unto its own self.

The quality of the education went up a couple of notches at Clark. I say that because they assigned me to what grade I should be in. They had me tested and the school administration placed me in the honor roll class and moved me up a grade. This was a total surprise to me, but not my parents. My parents always saw the potential within me and encourage me to do my best. This belief by my parents towards me motivated me to dig a little deeper and the fruit of my labor was reflected in my grades which turned out to be A's B's and C's in every lesson plan. This was enough to convince

my parents they should stop worrying about me. How wrong they would end up being, as another journey would begin for me that would take me away from a formal school education to a more self-taught education, coming from everyday life experience.

While attending Clark Junior High School, I had started strong arm robbing my fellow students. I did this mostly to the kids who were financially well-off and who always came to school flashing the money they had. These were the kids I preyed upon for about a month until I got caught. What led me to me being caught was the day I strong-armed the school secretary's son, whose dad just happened to be a police officer, too. Upon finding out what happened to his son he came knocking on my front door and proceeded to speak with my parents and explain to them what I had done. While he was speaking to my parents I was eavesdropping on the entire conversation and could see the shock and disappointment on my parents' faces since they had raised me better than my conduct at school reflected.

The police showed up a couple hours later to arrest and charge me with various crimes. They placed me in a juvenile detention center where I sat for a couple of months awaiting court dates. While there they didn't have any educational programs and I wouldn't end up going back to school for months after. I ended up pleading guilty to several charges and was sent to St. Charles Juvenile Correctional Center for 90 days. While there they had a mandatory school program for all juveniles without a high school diploma or GED. I was one of the juveniles that attended mandatory school. We were taught the basic subject matter of reading, math, and comprehension, which were things I already knew about.

Being locked away allowed me to discover how much I enjoyed reading since for me books became a refuge I turned to so I wouldn't dwell on the reality of my situation. As a result of my fondness for reading, books have become my one true companion my entire life. My love for reading and learning in general helped prepare me for the position I'm in right now, and that's involved with PNAP classes. Even though I have book smarts, and some street smarts, this didn't stop me from continuing to make bad choices over and over again.

A couple years later, I would find myself locked up again, this time in the Joliet Juvenile Correctional Center. My pursuit of a formal education picked up again. I became enrolled in a woodshop class and a GED class. Both classes gave me something positive to do while locked up. I put forward a genuine effort to get my GED. My first free GED test I flunked because I didn't take the test seriously. When my teacher allowed me to retest 90 days later, I passed all my tests and receive my GED diploma. Just by accomplishing this one thing made me so proud and it felt like an invisible weight was lifted off my shoulders that I didn't even know was there. Honestly, in the back of my mind, I kind of feel like a loser for not completing school and getting a high school diploma. Now this feeling - whatever it was - was now gone and I felt proud of myself. You never know how bad you want something until you get it.

After completing my goal of getting a GED diploma, my pursuit of building upon my accomplishments was derailed by the removal of college courses at all maximum security prisons within IDOC in the late 90s. These educational programs would not return until the early 2000. By then, most inmates behind the wall who were looking to better themselves through education sought their education through a more informal means. This consisted of reading books and educational material that may interest them. For the most part, I'm a byproduct of this informal education. That was up until I enrolled in these PNAP and LTO classes. Now I'm in the next chapter...

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## American Education: A Woke Explanation

Henry Lovett

If you closed your eyes and counted to five, you may be able to see a vision. Of course, this would be your imagination at work, or a memory. Yet, eyes open, a blind person can pick up on another's accent, dialect, or the use of ebonics. Anyone can smell the sweaty funk of a person through a wool sweater and corduroy pants. You can pick up on Irish Spring soap, or Gucci cologne, as a stranger approaches.

Without seeing a person, you can make choices and decisions about them. Those choices and decisions can harm or hurt depending on your goals. All you need is for your person of focus to do is fit a category, or meet one of those other senses you've based your decisions upon. Are they loud, clumsy, smelly, well-mannered? Sight unseen you could figure that out.

She never saw me, nor knew me. But the US educational system made decisions that impact me to this day. Although I'm speaking on the educational system it is but one branch to the American system. While the American system is but one glaring byproduct of the global system in social order. In this nation: rules, laws, policies, expectations, and definitions were created sight unseen for her people. If given the chance I would have posted the following on YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, or in somebody's Cloud. Please forgive all marijuana induced lapses in my memory.

I do remember the second grade. I had a frail-bodied black teacher named Mrs. Dawson. She had a chocolate complexion, and was as beautiful as Aunt Esther from off of Sanford and Son. This woman whoop me more in school than my mother has in my whole life. You've heard of teachers taping three and four rulers together to spank the palm of the students hand. This abuser issued out five smacks to your hand, ten to your butt. And a nice yanking of your ear to take you where she wanted you to go. Chewing gum got you spanked. Mumbling under your breath, you got spanked. Daydreaming, you got spanked. Saying "umm" or "mm-hmm", you

got spanked. Frowning and pulling your head back simultaneously, yep you win a brand new spanking.

Ironically, in the third grade I began to see child abuse hotline numbers posted all throughout my grade school. It took me to reach the age of 12 to learn of corporal punishment, and about teachers “no longer” being able to strike students physically. Way back then my young mind thought, “now all they need to do is outlawed mental and verbal whoopings.”

Fast forward to fifth grade. My teacher was a beautiful, thick-boned, blonde-dyed hair having sista who taught our class well. Her name was Mrs. Butler. It’s true, she did hide Ebony magazine in between a school book, which she read unbeknownst to some classmates. Well, unbeknownst to her, on the first day of class, me and my home you Lil’ Joseph stole the teacher’s edition to every course she had texts on. There were extra copies to these books. Grammar, science, math, social studies, every book she had, we had. The one with the answers in them, in red print. Lil’ Joseph only let our other friend Austin in on our secret. Amazingly, having the answers made us have to understand how we should come up with those answers. You may not believe it, but knowing the answers made us smarter.

The best example that I can come up with is if you need a home. Out of all the efforts one can put forward, imagine if you “stumbled upon” a brand new home. It’s yours, fully paid for, and perfect. So the teacher’s edition is the fully complete home. That would make the student’s book merely the bricks, drywall, nails, lumber, and parts for a home. This put us in a position that we had the home but then piece by piece we had to learn to put it all together.

As you know, during tests no books could aid us, but we kept up our status as top students. Mrs. Butler molded us and encouraged us. Through her pushing, I won the spelling bee against all grades of the entire school. I went on to win the spelling bee two more times in a higher grade.

In 7th grade I went outside for recess. I was running full speed ahead while looking backwards when I turned to face forward. Bam! My face collided right into the back of a kid named Andres’ head. It knocked my front tooth out which hung by the roots still in my

bleeding gums. It felt like veins were holding my tooth in as a faucet of blood poured from my mouth. Long story short, my teacher Mr. Maurisi and the assistant principal Mrs. Anderson felt no compassion for me. They both told me, and the gym teacher/school physician agreed, that I should wait until 1 p.m. for any medical attention. Recess was held at 11 a.m. for the record.

Although all three of them were white, I didn't view the situation as racial. I viewed adults and authority as retarded, if they thought I was going to wait two hours in pain dripping blood. So I walked out of the school unannounced, and unauthorized, straight to my granny's house. This resulted in my being suspended for a month, plus I got a whooping at home for my father. These are the moments I learned of the powers-that-be, abuse of power, rebellion, and outcasts. As a child, a young black male, I learned through experience that those in authority didn't have to do what was in my best interest. I asked myself, "if blood and physical damage isn't a priority, and keeping me out of school through suspension is harmful, how are they protecting or helping me?" My answer became fuck everybody in authority. Lesson learned.

Mr. Maurisi was an Italian. He look like Barney Rubble, with white and gray hair. He too kept a magazine in between a decoy. In his case he had Playboy covered up by a newspaper or golfing magazine. The kids in his class nicknamed him Chief Whitecloud. I'm not sure if its origin. But I know the combination of Native American culture, and Mr. Maurisi's authoritative attitude kept the name in use. His white hair motivated the white in Whitecloud. Race was never a conversation from the teacher, nor any student during the entire seventh grade class. Chief fully expressed the domination and position of authority displayed by Mr. Maurisi.

After Mr. Maurisi's 7th grade class, I moved on to Mrs. Baldwin's 8th grade experience. To Mrs. Baldwin I owe my understandings of: algebra, punctuation (when it's accurate), black history, American history, and critical thinking, amongst many lessons. These are my formative years at Mason Elementary School.

If you fumbled in your pocket and took out an iPhone to capture a photo of Bigfoot, that would encompass the amount of time I

actually learned knowledge in high school. And just as you'd barely miss catching a picture of Sasquatch, I also barely missed getting a high school diploma. Only as snapshots did I attend Carver, Luther South, and Corliss high schools in Chicago. When in between, two weeks a piece, I also frequented Thornton Township in Harvey, Illinois, and W.P. Daniels in Tupelo Mississippi.

Carver expelled me out of school for fighting. A group of guys attempted to jump me for not living in their neighborhood. I produce enough "Bam!" "Pow!" and "Zing!" that it would have made the Batman tv show proud. The complete expulsion from the school didn't make my parents proud, though. Thorn suspended me for missing too many consecutive homeroom classes. They put me in night classes at their alternative school. And I missed their schedule more professionally than I did the standard school hours. This resulted in my being booted out of that alternative school as well.

W.P. Daniels was the school I attended out of state. This was to circumvent all claims and technicalities of the CPS in Illinois. I gained a temporary background from that Mississippi system to be transferred to Luther South Catholic School in Chicago. Luther South booted me for smoking cigarettes in the bathroom. And for failing to return after "off-campus" lunch, on two occasions. Corliss didn't kick me out, or suspend me, and I was never written a single disciplinary report. However, the Illinois State Police took me at gunpoint away from my freedom. That terminated my path in the Chicago Public School System.

Sadly, as a seventeen-year-old, as a senior in high school, I was locked up. After only 30 days of being in prison I earned my GED. I next enrolled into college at Stateville, majoring in sociology. My minor was macroeconomics. Guess what though? Without any fighting, no ditching classes, and no ill intentions on my part: the Pell grant funding was cut by the federal government. On record it appears that I have an "F" for the portion of a semester I attended. But what's not seen is the anti death penalty act that Bill Clinton approved to swiftly killed Timothy McVeigh. That law sped up the appeals of a death sentence. And it also cut federal funding to education in the presence of America. To say, "we have a no tolerance

policy towards fighting” or, “to suspensions and it’s automatic you’ll be terminated as a student,” amounts to blind conspiracies. Particularly if the same initiators of punishment aren’t implemented on other “privileged” students (same violations, different school districts).

Through my experience, I bear witness as an expert that the spirit of school (i.e. education system) is designed to accomplish two goals. The first goal being to mold the student into the culture, mentality, and reality of conformity. Compliance is needed for the overall system of the country to exist. In this light, global stability and international norms also require such passivity. This brings us to the second goal of the educational experience. That being the weeding out and to cull all rebels, outsiders, and the undesirables.

When I was told, “no talking in class,” it wasn’t a rule for Henry Lovett. That was a twofer. You getting students to do as they’re told, and you expose who won’t or can’t do as they’re told. Two for one. Similarly, to require students to learn of a subject, then possibly pass a test on said subject is also a tripwire. As difficult and boring as neuroscience is, it could be used to measure the level and capabilities of a student. As an atypical example, 2nd graders aren’t expected to master neuroscience. Yet, if it was “official knowledge” that second graders should pass tests of neuroscience, failure would be expected on that grade level. A high standard can also be the weapon used to section off those undesired.

These are only three options to this long standing conspiracy we called the “education system.” You can help it. You can get hurt by it. Or you can tear it down, and start from scratch.

Hence the blessing I received after being locked up 20 years, and being allowed courses with the Prison and Neighborhood Arts Project. Also known as PNAP. This volunteer program offers knowledge consistent with the development and recognition of the human status. Since it’s not government-funded the pedagogy is fluid and productive, all at the same damn time. What is super ironic, is that within the heart of an institution (Stateville prison), PNAP allows habilitation when rehabilitation is the lie told as one of the purposes of the prison system. The writing (by me) and reading

(by you) of these very words are PNAP induced energy. You can call it the struggle and/or protest sought by Paulo Freire or Gloria Ladson-Billings. I called it my truth, my narrative.

In a lovely prison cell, at Pontiac prison, I came up with a bright idea to write a book of poetry. It's still unpublished but titled "Poetry of a Hostage." This was back in 1999. Little did I know, years later I'd attend a PNAP class with the actual Poetry Foundation staff as instructors. This opportunity was yet another PNAP upliftment.

My first class in PNAP was a visual arts course. My teacher was Sarah Ross. As the chief administrative person of Awesomeness, Sarah Ross represents the leadership of PNAP. Through her guidance I learned of, and produced my own, collages. One collage managed to be acceptable enough that a prominent blogger posted it. Then my uncle purchased it at an auction to frame it and place it in his family's home. I was also in an advanced essay class with Jill Petty. Honestly, I was appalled that at 37 years old, it took Jill Petty to teach me the definition, rules, and techniques of an essay. Argumentative essay, informative essay, general essay, and others are a few I learned through PNAP.

Jill Petty's writing class was followed the next semester by my attendance in a poetry class. The teacher, Marvin Tate, was a professional poet. The poems learned through the Poetry Foundation received some funk and soul via Marvin Tate.

The educational collaboration with PNAP from artists, teachers, editors, and the free thinkers of our world is a beautiful thing. Take for example, the Albany Park Theater Project teamed up with PNAP. This performance art course created by that meshing produced an outcome that moved me. The outcome I refer to is the experiences and thoughts of grown men, in prison, being turned into non verbal expressions acted out. Wait for it. Not only by those grown men, but also by the kids of the park district. The kids embodied the same passion, radiance, and grace. The PNAP classes were transcribed by one student each week. Those minutes can be viewed on the APTP/Stateville.com webpage.

Last, but the opposite of least, is my current instructor Tess Landon. In the past, she was the generator that powered up my

“creative art” book called “Mother F \_ \_ \_ the First Amendment.” The class then was a creative writing course. It allowed 15 students to manifest the finished manuscript of our own book. Only about 10 students took advantage of such a life adding accomplishment. The written, spoken, and understood word hold so much power that the prison (state) shut down all PNAP classes from one of those books. One word of one line was misunderstood and a cull was called. Thankfully though the wardens and Chaplain Adamson and the efforts of Sarah Ross and PNAP faculty, PNAP is back.

As you exist today, reading these words, Tess Landon has again contributed to my knowledge. Through Writing: Education from the Public to the Personal, her class brings a new seed of my own to the world. This is the seed of a new reality. A reality of freedom. The freedom to learn, think, speak, create, define, and defy. The seed of suggesting all adults get held accountable in a punishable way for the failure of all undereducated people.

If only “school” would have provided or allowed such applicable knowledge as PNAP. To me, PNAP became the red/blue pill as I’m “restricted in prison” watching The Matrix.

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## Personal Education Narrative

### Kennth Key

Education has always been something stressed by my parents and this has stuck with me. Despite the choices I have made in my life, I've always stayed connected with some form of self-education or educational system within the prison.

I am 63 years of age, incarcerated over 35 years now serving life without the possibility of parole. When I reflect upon the people who have touched my life in a very special and profound way, and I consider life-changing, two people certainly come to mind, Professor Andrew McKenna and Alice Kim, for without them I wouldn't be on this writing journey.

It was about two and a half years ago when I met Professor McKenna, a man who taught literature at Loyola University. He was about to retire and decided through the influence of Dr. Margaret Burroughs to volunteer at Stateville Correctional Center. Professor McKenna's mission was to teach men about the world of literature and creative writing.

Professor McKenna would introduce us to a quote by the author who said, "you read and then you write about what you read." It was here I would be introduced to the world of books and social commentary of the past, which in many cases are still relevant today. For example, James Baldwin and how he wrote about and tackles issues of race. Even now as I write this these are still the social issues of the day.

Each week I would come to class and share my writings based on what I had read. Receiving encouraging feedback certainly fed my ego, which was deflated at times as well. What I was convinced of was that I should write more.

In the interim of being part of Professor McKenna's class, I was given the opportunity to write for a blog called [livefromlockdown.com](http://livefromlockdown.com), a site geared toward the youth. My topics for the blog centered on the perils of prison life and the consequences of the choices we make. As I began to write from my experiences in prison, I began

to receive, via the other person who ran the blog, very positive feedback, some as far as Paris. This is truly one of the reasons I write. I was certainly moved in so many ways over the years I was in Professor McKenna's class. To him I am eternally thankful.

Later on I would meet Ms. Alice Kim. Her class was called Writing Through the Wall. She would bring three powerful women writers to workshop with our class. Women such as Maya Schenwar, editor and writer for Truthout, who introduced us to her sister who was incarcerated and would have her child in prison. Ms. Schenwar's most important advice to writers and on writing would be to know what you are an expert in and why, not to limit yourself, and to consider your own experience and insight you've had throughout your life, not just what you've read over and from external sources. Then there was Ms. Eve Ewing, editor and co-founder of Seven Scribes. She told us essays start with revision and that we are the expert on our own life. Writing the truth about you is always better than writing a lie. Last but certainly not least was Miss Natalie Woods of WBEZ who let us know when writing an essay, that your first sentence matters and to write, write, write.

Each writer imparted something to me on the art of writing and for that I'm eternally grateful. Armed with these gems, I entered my first writing contest offered by Columbia University, didn't win, but the response I received was life-changing.

The letter applauded my effort and pointed out what attracted them to the writing. It was a statement at the close of their letter that touched me, to know that they had been touched. The responder said, "I was completely floored by the way you began and ended the piece, you started by letting the reader know that your son is in the same prison with you, then introduce us to your family, your experience, your history, then almost out of the blue, you say your son is in the cell right next to you." It's these types of comments that keep me exploring, sharing my history, my choices, my experiences, and their effects on me and my son.

I've learned throughout writing that I have the ability to dig deep, be honest, and to share, and it's also been therapeutic. I write now not just for the youth, but for me. Maybe somehow I may be

of help to someone else who might be walking on the same path. I pray that through my writing, I can encourage them to choose another path.

The comment was enough to move me to keep this instrument in hand. Not realizing until now, it is a brush--fluid, creating, and moving people by the images created upon this line. I look forward to the amazing relationships with readers or even a special kinship with words themselves.

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## The Art of the Sale

Luigi Adamo

Throughout my entire professional career I have relied on one particular skillset for almost all of my success. No other skillset has ever served me better in my profession, or in life in general, than the ability to sell. I can still, after all this time, vividly recall the circumstances surrounding my acquisition of this skillset, and how I learned how to nurture and implement it with incredible mastery very easily in my professional career.

It was mid September of 1997, I had turned 16 that past may, and I was beginning my junior year of high school at Driscoll Catholic in Addison. That summer was a very profitable one, as I had made a lot of money working as a manual laborer for my father's landscaping company. Now that school had resumed, working there wasn't feasible. If I was going to earn the money I would need to upkeep the ownership of my car, or to be able to afford the expenses needed for a young man to enjoy the company of a decent girlfriend of some modest prestige, I was going to have to find a part-time job that I could work after school. Thankfully, I'd earned enough money over the summer that I was not desperate so I could afford to be choosy and confident.

On my way home from my first day of class I stopped at the local Office Max on Army Trail Road in Bloomingdale. I was just looking to buy some "back to school" odds-and-ends, pens, notebooks, things of that nature. I got whatever I thought I needed and walked to the checkout register. I chose the checkout lane with a very pretty blonde cashier, for obvious reasons any 16 year old boy could explain. I put my selected items on the rubber conveyor belt, and as she was ringing me up I tried to think of some way to strike up a conversation with her. I couldn't for the life of me think of anything, so like a huge dork I asked as smoothly as I could, "so, is this place hiring or what?"

She smiled a little, the kind of smile that said she knew what I was really attempting, but in a deadpan tone that also told me she

wasn't interested. "Yeah, you got to talk to Bob." She picked up the receiver of some hidden telephone and quickly dialed some numbers. After a brief moment's pause, she spoke into the phone. "Yeah Bob, it's Jerrie at register 3. There's a guy here looking for a job."

The next thing I know, Bob is coming around to meet with me. I wasn't really serious about looking for a job, I was just trying to make some time with this girl, now all the sudden I have to deal with Bob! Who the hell is Bob?

Bob turned out to be a middle-aged man of about five foot six, with the pudgy build of retail management, a very bad toupee, and even worse coffee breath. But Bob had something else that I noticed, a dark complexion and an Italian last name on his name tag, and that was my cue. I shook Bob's hand with that firm and sure handshake my father had taught me for conveying confidence before business transactions. Well we shook, I introduce myself, using my full name in the most exaggerated Italian style. "Hi, I'm Luigi Paolo Italo Adamo, how very nice to meet you," I said with a grin. I apologize for interrupting him and I asked if he was currently employing anyone. Bob tried to shoo me away by telling me to fill out an employee application at the customer service desk, but at this point I was far too invested to be given such a casual brush off. I figured I'm in for a penny, in for a pound and I grabbed him by the shoulder. I explained how I thought that it was foolish as well as lazy to simply fill out some standardized form, to just hand it over to some stranger in the hopes that someone, someday, might call me back. I asked him if perhaps he wasn't too busy, he could conduct an interview now, seeing as how we were both there in the here and now.

Bob seem very impressed with my stark directness and initiative. He escorted me to his office, and I got my interview, and about half an hour later, the job.

After the customary filling out of employment forms, Bob dug out and OfficeMax smock out of some desk drawer, printed me out my very own name tag and asked me when I'd like to start. Being on such a role I figured, "why stop now?", so I asked Bob if I could start that day. He was again surprised, but also again please. He agreed.

He walked me to the electronics department. On the way, we passed by that cute cashier, I will never forget that look of surprised disbelief on her face when she saw me in my fresh OfficeMax smock, newly-minted name tag, and fully employed, not a full hour from the time we last spoke.

Once we got to the electronics department, Bob introduce me to my new supervisor, Kirk Claus. Kirk was a six foot two, heavy set ginger goth in his mid-twenties. He was wearing a white button-down shirt, black cargo pants, and what looked like a screaming skull tie. He had that red, splotchy flush to his face that all gingers seem to get, you know, the one that makes it look like they're always angry or embarrassed. His strawberry blonde eyebrows and thin wisp of chin hair clashed terribly with his oily, raven hair, that curled up in and almost ring at his shoulders. His fingers were decorated ridiculously with pewter skull rings and sharpened nails with onyx polish. Imagine a taller, fatter, greasier Ed Sheeran dressed like Marilyn Manson for Halloween and you would have a fairly accurate portrait of Kirk Claus.

Kirk's unprofessional appearance was in direct contrast to his knowledge of electronic office equipment. I was immediately impressed with how much he knew about every single product on the sales floor. As we walked through each aisle he would spout model numbers and specifications of this or that like some kind of computerized sorcerer casting a robotic spell. By the end, there wasn't enough smelling salts in Christendom to stop my head from spinning. There wasn't any formal training at OfficeMax, I was thrown to the wolves on the sales floor right after Kirk's brief and dizzying tour had ended. I had no idea what I was supposed to be doing, where to find anything, or even anything at all about the merchandise I was supposed to be selling. I walked around the sales floor asking this person or that if I could help them all the while knowing full well that I could not. But they didn't know that I didn't know, so I bluffed them and acted like I knew.

If someone asked me a question about a product that I didn't know, I would just run and ask Kirk. Kirk had to bail me out about a dozen times that first day. Despite not knowing much about what

I was doing, my portrayal of confidence seemed to work on about a third of the customers. I knew that if I wanted to be really successful at selling these products I was going to have to learn all I could about them.

I pulled Kirk aside at the end of that first shift and I asked him point blank, “ok, how the hell did you learn so much about this crap?”

“Everything you could ever want to know about this junk is all right here.” Kirk pulled out a massive three ring binder that contained every spec for every product in the entire store. I smiles as I took the binder from Kirk’s demonically decorated hand as I imagined the possibilities.

For the next week or two I would rush to work just as soon as school let out, 2 or 3 hours before my shift, and pour over the contents of that binder. Studying it like it was the true gospel. It wasn’t long before my product knowledge equaled my projected product knowledge and even rivaled Kirk’s. My comfortability on the sales floor ballooned as did my confidence. This confidence made it remarkably easier to sell products to customers. I realize this effect on my first day, but now I understood how much more powerful real confidence was than just projected confidence. This lesson stuck with me for the rest of my life and from that point on, no matter what it was I was selling, I made sure I knew everything there was to know about it.

My sales rates exploded. I became a master of the up sell, adding accessories, extras, and extended warranties with every sell. At the same time I was tweaking my sales approach, honing it sharper and sharper after each conversation with each customer. I would explore what seemed to work and abandon what wouldn’t. Mastering the almost-art of conveying information about whatever product to the customer in a manner that would excite their imaginations about the prospects of owning what I was selling, and motivating them to pull the trigger on the decision to buy. My sales numbers skyrocketed like they were designed by Wernher Von Braun. My numbers not only trumped those of the full-time employees, but were the best in the entire district.

After the third pay period that I outpaced the sales commission cap for part-time employees in a row, I had to have a sit-down with coffee breath Bob. The sales cap was this stupid paycheck handicap only part-time employees suffered. If our commissions exceeded \$200 during anyone pay period, we no longer earned commission for whatever products we sold. Full timers had no commission cap, the problem was that I couldn't work full-time as I was still in high school.

I talked to Bob, I reasoned with him, and showed him how my sales commissions would be almost tripled if the cap was lifted, so I asked him to lift it, or if that wasn't possible, to raise it. Bob wiggled and wormed, and managed to stammer out some lame excuse or another, and refused both my requests. I realized then that I could find no real support for advancement under a manager like Bob. He didn't care how much commission I earned, or how much I sold. His paycheck was the same whether I came to work or not. I change task tactics, I ask Bob if he could print out the most recent sales numbers and sales rankings. I told him I wanted to show my mother how good I was doing. Bob seemed to really appreciate that, and he agreed.

On my next day off I took Bob's consolation offering along with my most recent pay stub right across the street to Best Buy. I walked right up to the best-looking customer service girl I could find, because why waste an opportunity to talk to a pretty gal, I was 16 after all, and I demanded to speak to a manager, and I wouldn't say what for. I knew that the mystery about what I wanted would hasten a manager's appearance.

In no time out came a twenty-something muscle-bound Guido who could have just as easily walked off the boardwalk of the Jersey Shore as the manager's office. He started up to me with bulging arms vented his side like a quick draw artist from the old west, and a confident gate that brooked no challenges to his authority. He introduced himself simply as "Pavone" in a tone that belonged to an early Stallone movie, and I knew it once I was a shoe-in.

Pavone's whole aggressive demeanor changed the moment I introduced myself in the same exaggerated Italian manner as I did

with Bob. Hey, if I had to suffer through the torturous heyday of the Super Mario Brothers with that name, I might as well use it to my advantage when the opportunity presented itself. Pavone and I hit it off right from the introduction. He listened intently as I described my frustrations with Bob's unwillingness to lift or raise my commission cap. Pavone was astonished, he took it as an almost personal affront that Bob would ever dare hold back on a fellow Pison in such a way. "That's just crazy, Luigi," he said angrily. "What does this guy care what the company pays you? It's not like it's coming out of his check. He's just a douche bag that's all," Pavone pontificated.

He asked to see my corroborating evidence of sales report and paycheck stub, and after the quickest of glances he offered me a job, at a \$2 per hour raise, and no sales commission cap at all.

I remember how proud I was of myself when I put that Smurf blue Best Buy polo shirt on for the first time. My performance showed my appreciation for Pavone's generosity, and I was soon one of his top sales clerks. Pavone saw that I had more potential as a salesman, and he sent me off to one senior seminar after another for further training. I learned more and more about the fine art of sales. Tips and tricks I never even knew existed. Best Buy had poured all sorts of money into researching the psychology behind buying and selling and converted that R&D into practical sales training.

I didn't realize it then but I was getting invaluable training that I would apply much later in my professional career in the booming Chicagoland real estate market of the early 2000s. At that time, I only saw it as a way to make money for fun and toys. I never thought I would build a whole professional life around these skills.

I left Best Buy after high school, and the chain abandoned the sales commissions all together soon after that. My friends joked that when I left I took all of the commissions with me. Comments like this only fueled my already supercharged ego and arrogance. Something I still struggle to control to this day.

I will always be grateful for the knowledge and experience I gained while working at OfficeMax and Best Buy. You see, selling is selling, the same principles apply whether you're selling a toothbrush, a toaster, a million dollar condo downtown, or yourself. This

skill set is universal and omni-important. If you can sell you can do almost anything in the world of business.

I was extremely fortunate to be able to acquire this skill and sharpen it to a razor's edge so early on in my professional life. It is a skill set that will never leave me, never atrophy, and never become obsolete. For as long as there are things to buy, someone will need to sell them, and I will always be able to find gainful employment.

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## You Were Wrong!

Markus Buchanon

As far back in my youth as I can remember, my mom would always tell me, “son, you don’t have any friends.” it’s something that has stuck with me into adulthood. But, even today, I’ve still never completely understood what Mom meant, or whether she was right.

During my youth, much of what my mom expressed to me reflected the harsh reality of the poverty that surrounded us. Despite our Section 8 housing and monetary public aid assistance, all we had to show for ourselves was a dilapidated green house, which we shared with rats and roaches. Our broken home, divided by the divorce of my parents, was my original and most influential school.

I was the last born of six children. I never owned anything new (everything was handed down from my siblings), Nor did I ever have the luxury of privacy, not even a bedroom to call my own. Oddly, even with a roof over my head I felt like a vagabond. I’ve a currently moved from room to room sleeping where I could, a couch, chair, or the floor, cuddling with the insects and Vermin who also we’re simply looking to get in where they could.

Outside of home I often found myself alone wandering our neighborhood. In doing so, I would consider mom’s statement about not having friends. Unsure sure of its meaning, I would shy away from other children. In addition, my siblings were much older than me, so an attachment was lacking in the home, too. In turn, I played very little as a child and spent most of my days with or around people much older than me, including adults. However, the adult-like ways I adopted went unnoticed in my home. Even things which could be considered extraordinary coming from a child my age was not celebrated, nor rewarded, in my home.

For example, on the block where I lived was the home of the bird lady. Her name was Mary, but I called her Bird, because she owned a rooster, a peacock, and bred numerous types of parrots, all bright-colored with stout, hooked bills.

I developed a working relationship with Bird, where, at the age of 10, I was being paid \$5 per week to occasionally help out with the parrots, and an additional \$5 per 5 days of walking her daughter to school. As it turned out, I never really helped with the parrots. Rather, I would spend much of the time with Nacho, Bird's husband, who was a full-time portrait painter. Nacho taught me everything to know about drawing with a pencil and I became very good at it.

In addition, I would occasionally join Bird and Nacho on their trips to the flea market. There I discovered an old, but fair conditioned, cello, which Bird bought for me as payment for the work I did for her. Bird was surprised at first that I wanted it, until, when asked why, I told her it was beautiful. My mom thought so too. When I brought it home she took it from me and placed it in her sitting room as a decoration. Nonetheless, I possessed the cello long enough to admire it and want more.

I soon discovered an orchestra class at my school and quickly enrolled. But, rather than play the cello, I was forced into the violin chair by the instructor. The decision turned out to be perfect for me. I had no problem advancing through the competition and alternating between first and second chair.

Two years would pass before my mom knew I could play. When she heard me play for the first time she cried. But, she never told me what her tears meant. Normally a smile says a thousand words, but hers was unreadable as she wiped her tears away, got up, and walked out of the room to continue her chores. Mom's response was pretty much the same no matter what I achieved.

The response from my siblings was no better. They all joked, calling me "glow bug" and "professor." Before long I found myself hiding my interest to spare myself the ridicule. I began to feel embarrassed by the differences in my interests when compared to those of my siblings. This bothered me.

I found myself to be different from my siblings and community peers, and it made me feel I was doing something wrong. I found myself and honor student placed in advance classrooms. I found myself as a freshman in high school set to play varsity football until I was abruptly shot in a case of mistaken identity. I found that

nothing seemed impossible for me... except receiving support from those at home. Those whom I loved most and sought approval from.

I began to recognize two worlds. The first contain my family and community. The second was school. At the time, the conflict arose in the choice between dividing one from the other or becoming the bridge; between gathering the best from both worlds or corrupting one with the misunderstandings and misfortunes of the other; between rejection from peers in one or rejection from peers in the other; between transcending the marginalized pedigree in my community or remaining loyally by the side of those incapable; between giving my all or nothing.

This deadlock nurtured my belief that people have many truths. Some of which conflict or devalue the voices and experiences of others who are different. It took years into adulthood to discover my own truth. A truth that is still being developed as I continue to navigate life.

It is important to note, however, that there was nothing in my youth, at my home, to match or compensate for certain aspects of school which couldn't afford to conform to my home environment. Without balance between home and school, my life shifted in one direction, back to my community, into my home, and without exception to my achievements in school.

Because no one amongst those whom I loved most could comprehend my gifts, their potent misinformed influence upon me prevailed. As a result, my gifts fell to the wayside to be passed by. In the end mom was right... I didn't have friends. But, only because I allowed myself to believe I didn't. I was ignorant, convinced by ignorance to be ignorant. I'm sorry!... But, you were wrong mom!

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## Rhythm and Poetry - Education Timeline

Markus Buchanon

My true confession...Mom's last investment. One of six adolescents...Life to me was without blessings. Poverty was my profession...Penitentiary lessons (Behold my resurrection upon my release).

Protection from the beast acquired from my allegiance to the streets while young and mentally weak.

This brotherly guidance amongst the black sheep, when war cries souls weep... We are marginalized... These are our streets.

It's sad to see, but evidently daddy didn't teach me. The love was there but still momma couldn't reach me.

The consequence of my existence - is the agony... Living without a father figure resulted in tragedy.

Thug living got the best of me... Devoted years employing rules to move in silence - the use of violence, as an instrument of persuasion - discovered state and federal laws and legislation. At 21 was blind leading a generation... At 25 was sentenced to life incarceration.

Have you ever seen a child raised amongst sin? Musically passionate to skillfully play the violin with varsity status as a freshman playing football, shot three times close range, first downfall.

I'm a student for life - I'm living education - I don't have a type.

My teacher is time and her lesson is wrong and right...

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## Personal Education Narrative

### Rickey Robinson

My education began within a Chicago housing project. My sister and I walked ourselves to and from school, locking in until our mother returned from work. At school, my peers terrorized me. I was also beat up and robbed repeatedly. As a result, I quietly develop some psychological behavior issues.

By the 6th grade, like other males similarly situated, I was not able to function in a regular class setting and was placed in a special education program. This program was destined for failure with its lack of resources or academically qualified teachers. I didn't have to show up for school often, and knew that I would be automatically pushed up to the next grade. Quickly, activities within the street gang life became more attractive.

After being pushed through the sixth and seventh grade, coupled with my street gang affiliation, I was sent to Brinkley, Arkansas as an attempt to turn me around. Entering the ninth grade with white and black students was different. Brinkley's school system proved to be quite challenging. My brain had never been so stimulated before with so much uninteresting information that I couldn't keep up with Brinkley's curriculum. The depression that followed caused me to disengage from any effort towards succeeding in their school system. I purposely failed the first semester and was able to return back to Chicago.

Back in Chicago, in a segregated black community, school, and household, I delved deep into gang life. After several run-ins with the law and rival gang members, I was sent to Minneapolis, Minnesota as a second attempt to turn me around.

Like Chicago, Minneapolis had a special education program where I was directed to enroll in the sole alternative high school in the city. Here, the school was integrated. The resources, qualified teachers, and even incentives like Timberwolves tickets as rewards for achievement were available. Known as a racial melting pot, the multiculturalism could clearly be seen and felt throughout

Minneapolis as well as the school I attended. It would appear that the teachers got it right at the school as every student, including myself, had our individual needs met. For the first time in my life I had the will to learn, the perfect opportunity to get a quality education. Unfortunately, my gang ties followed me to Minneapolis and that pulled most of my focus to the streets. After five months in Minneapolis, and a couple weeks in their juvenile detention center, I was back in Chicago. After four months back in Chicago, one month shy of being 16, I was arrested and charged as an adult for murder.

Upon my vindication and release, I attempted to enroll back into the neighborhood high school as a senior. However, no records of my education received in the jail could be found and I was to resume the 10th grade. Refusing to be two grades behind, I ultimately settled on getting my GED at the Olive Harvey Community College. Seven months after my 18th birthday, I would thereafter find that any further education I would receive would be within a Natural Life incarceration.

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## Choices

Steven Zirko

Higher education does not guarantee success, it is not a cure-all; however, what it can do is afford choices and allow the holder to engage in informed decisions.

Thereto, the most important decision only a student can make is what will be my major and then expect to do that focus as a job in life. This is a life-altering choice that ought to be carefully weighed. This author cannot stress that point enough. I'll say it again, "a life-altering choice that ought to be carefully weighed."

So what does it degree allow? It allows an interview but does not mean one automatically gets the job, and in just about any field this is the case.

Higher education can offer contacts in a field, it can give one a sense of identity and direction, it can even promulgate morals and values, more on that point a bit later.

Is a bachelor's degree in a given discipline enough to permit that interview and then secured a position? It depends on the discipline. A finance major, a chemist, a CPA, sure, they can secure gainful employment with a baccalaureate. How about a poetry major or a philosophy major? Unfortunately, no! Not in our society.

Think I'm wrong?

Ok, I challenge the reader(s) to find a help wanted ad on any platform anywhere in the United States for a full-time job as a philosopher of a poet or an avant garde musician or even a Harvard educated art historian.

Now, one may be able to secure a teaching position at varied levels, but that is a teaching job and not a full-time artists or poet or philosopher who gets paid for their art and/or craft.

If one absolutely must, meaning your soul and spirit can only be satiated by being involved in the fine arts, then yes, absolutely, go for it with all your might, this author appreciates you conviction and determination, but be fully aware, you will likely have to create your own job by and through your wits utilizing an improvisational

interdisciplinary approach to a prospective employer. This is how and why the smartest person in the room, someone with an art history major from Harvard is working for the Park District and is, I'm sure, defining a great arts program therein.

There is only one lead curator at the Art Institute so one does what they must.

This willingness to work is a choice, a great choice, and is critical to one's success.

This writer gets to be overly critical for I hold a bachelor's degree in music from the American Conservatory of Music and a master's degree in music from DePaul University. Both mid-tier schools but good schools nonetheless.

As a late teen, I made the conscious decision that this is what I must do. It ought to be noted that I've been working at my craft on and off since age seven. Thereof I was a somewhat successful pro musician from the age of 16, performing in varied settings and genres all over the world, then later in life, I was a successful music educator, and with the proper certification or degrees, I taught mostly at the collegiate level.

In relation to being a successful pro musician at a tender age, I recall being a 19 year old kid who happened to hear through the grapevine of auditions being held to play the piano in a downtown Chicago hotel lobby bar (The Knickerbocker). I arrived to see about forty or so pro musicians, most of which were a whole lot older and more experienced than me. Think quick Zirco, what is going to set you apart from the mob?

I got the job!

Here's how I did it:

I went to the bartender, and since I looked like I was 12 when I was 19 I immediately showed him my ID (dake) and ordered a drink and tipped him ten bucks--then patiently waited. Sure enough Juan the bartender comes over to check on me in just a few minutes and as good bartenders do with a tipper, struck up a conversation where I casually interjected, "who's doing the hiring? The GM, the bar manager, the food and beverage guy, who?"

“Well, the GM likes to micromanage, that’s him right over there,” Juan the bartender exclaimed.

“So, do you happen to know his favorite song?”

“Sure, Chim Chimeree, something or other.”

Of all the goofy Disney songs from the 1960s, that one beats them all. So, I get to the piano and the second song I play, or fake through, is the aforesaid. Well, Rod, the GM of the hotel, comes right over and asks how a young kid knows that old song.

“One of my favorites,” I lied, and went on to expound on that the fine Disney songwriters of the 1960s are the most underappreciated lot.

The next thing I knew he takes me up to the HR office and here I am filling out W-2 forms, reflecting, I just beat out a bunch of 40, 50 and 60 year old pro musicians for this little job, which I was only interested in doing for two-and-a-half to three months, tops, for I had a cruise ship show band music director job lined up starting in September that circumnavigated South America, I was excited to see Rio and Buenos Aires. These older musicians were hoping to hold this job for the long haul, 20 years was how long the former guy was here. Which made me question, when I’m 40, 50, 60, how can I prevent this from happening to me?

That ten buck tip and some creative thinking allowed me to earn more than ten grand that summer. It was right there that day that I decided that at some point I better start my own booking agency, and later I did. I owned and operated a successful music booking agency, but that is a topic for another time.

Was I really better than my fierce competition? In many instances, no, but what I did convey to a prospective clients/employer was a willingness to work ten times harder than anyone else, and there is the “rub” for people in the arts, you will work hard, you should work harder than you ever thought you could.

As alluded to previously, higher education can offer many things, including but not limited to morals and values...for instance, I taught a humanities class at the college level where my unspoken undeclared goal was to enable that future rocket scientist or nurse

or barner or panhandler to become a more conscientious thinker. Hopefully a better person.

Oh, they will know the core material, but also knowing right from wrong, and choosing right is much more important.

Comparing and contrasting Rodin and Praxiteles of being able to discern distinctive attributes of Romanesque Architecture at the level of an Art Historian, sure, it would be great to do, something to aspire to, but I can't expect that from a future veterinarian or engineer or MBA.

On more than one occasion it may or may not be construed that this author has gone on a course of denigrating engagement in the fine arts, a sort of self repudiation. This is not and will never be the nexus of anything I do. I only mean to be as honest and forthright as possible, for a true respect and admiration exists for those in my field and the many parallel universes of those in the fine arts.

Personally, I tend to think along the same lines as visual artists, writers, you know the creative types, and accountants too... Yes accountants. Our minds work alike, I usually get along with them especially well, you see, professional musicians think in terms of numbers, this is how we are trained, how we think of music, how we visualize sound. I could speak of plagal cadences, tritone subs, species theory, the sonata allegro form, and on and on and I will always refer to numbers therein. A theory of music course was just one of many music classes I taught and enjoyed.

Very often a teacher will be asked to teach a class outside his field. You do it because that's the job. I taught everything from a research class to an American history class to regularly proctoring science and math finals. Would I rather have been performing or orchestrating my own compositions? Sure I would, but I was willing to do this trade off to allow my art, and many times I even liked the alternate subject.

As aforementioned, this willingness to work is critical to success, perhaps this ethic is in play and is why a Harvard educated art historian has decided to teach at a prison, a place society considers the lowest of the low. Hats off to all those who give their time and

energy in such a “no applause” setting, their commitment is great and for what it’s worth they have this author’s unyielding applause.

Speaking of silent applause or approval, I would sense it in my Appreciation of Music class at the college level where a final research paper was necessary to complete the course. It had to be at least ten pages, with either footnotes or endnotes, a bibliography, cover page, etc. And, most importantly, music and its many related fields had to be the focal point of the paper.

At first sight on the syllabi, this scared students who were all non-music majors until I proffered: What do you want to be when you grow up? What is your major, and what are you thinking of majoring or minoring in? What do you like to do in your free time?

“A nurse, I’m in nursing school right now,” a pretty blond in a paisley dress blurted out.

“Very good, ok, write me a paper about the usage of musical therapy for patients suffering dementia or severe depression, or how about the child development studies that posit Mozart for babies as a tool that promotes accelerated brain growth? Focus on why it is beneficial, or is not. What kind of music is used, and how often. Talk about its overall efficacy.”

A strong look of relief washed over the student’s face.

Another student exclaimed, in an exasperated tone, “I have no idea about a major,” but added meekly, “I like to make stuff outta wood.”

“Ok, how about a paper on instrument repair and violin making? Talk about how the master fiddle maker uses varnish to affect the timbre, or talk about the craftsmanship that goes into the instrument of the woodwind family, piano repair and manufacturing. Pick one and go. Now, I have office hours on my door and I want to discuss a topic with each of you individually. You will not stump me.” Again, a sense of relief, this time over the entire class.

In closing, it is respectfully submitted that Zirko’s Aristotelian like Enthymeme or Zirko’s philosophical bent of allowing education to manifest itself and be ultimately used as a tool that one must work at and in time through, and most importantly choosing wisely at all levels, is a representation of one way to accomplish a long

term goal that may culminate in what is loosely deemed as having a modicum of success.

Wherefore, what do you want to be when you grow up? What choices will you now make?

As for this writer, I possess an overriding goal. One that I've been working on for the duration of this nightmare I find myself in.

Free is what I want to be when I grow up.

I choose freedom.

### Epilogue

The author Steven L. Zirko has a pending Actual Innocence claim in the system right now. By and through his determination and efforts he has uncovered DNA forensic evidence from the State's forensic experts and their own crime labs that is exonerative and expulsive. The opposition's forensic conclusions state over and over again the following: "Steven Zirko cannot be associated with this evidence." and "It is impossible for Steven Zirko to have committed these crimes."

Needless to say, my claim is and always has been complete innocence, and now I possess the opposition's experts saying it too. Is this enough to warrant a reversal or a new trial, a remand.

Something?

I don't know.

I do know how to learn so whilst illegally, unjustly incarcerated I turned myself into a paralegal legal eagle, jailhouse lawyer type, primarily earnestly endeavoring on my own voluminous stuff and I have read, heard about, and witnessed first hand multiple examples where the jurisprudence system refuses to allow a specific petition to be entered into the call or docket and not due to a timeliness issue or a legal technicality or some other frivolous reasoning. In fact, they like to and do very often just ignore the meritorious issue(s) and litigant.

They know that if heard, the system may be forced to right a wrong and since judges and prosecutors possess (wrongly) absolutely immunity they have little reason to none to admit their injudiciousness. Yes, judges and prosecutors very often allow and

promote this type of miscarriage of justice to continue. So I don't know if conclusive proof via DNA forensic evidence that is exonerative and exculpatory is enough to win the day.

Although I know it ought to be.

What do you think?

Respectfully Submitted,

Steven L. Zirko

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## A Chip Off the Old Block

Raymond Nesbitt

I should be in the Guinness Book of World Records. The topic: “Youngest Child to be Expelled from Kindergarten.” Ripley’s newspaper column “Believe it or Not” may be more appropriate. As a hyperactive child diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, it was difficult for me to conform to the school structure.

In the morning, mom would drop me off at the front door of the school. I would hug her and wave goodbye. When she left, I’d run out the backdoor to play in the schoolyard by myself. The only time I stayed in class was when the teacher tied me to the chair. The school wanted to administer the drug Ritalin, but mom refused. Eventually, the principal name Pandoffy intervened. I recall him having a head full of white hair, despite being an old man. He said I was too disruptive, the had me expelled.

After being expelled, my family relocated to Englewood’s Benjamin Bannaker grammar school. They had a public announcement (PA) system, replete with a loudspeaker in every class. The first time I heard an announcement over the PA system, it scared me. I hurled a plethora of profanity laced epithets at the unknown voice. The kindergarten teacher scolded me, then took me to the principal’s office to apologize. I recall not like Benjamin Bannaker. We never learned to read, we just played all day.

Apartment life was no better. Although I didn’t like this school, it offered me refuge from the deluge of rats living in the building. These vermin would boldly intrude upon garbage and freshly cooked meals alike. Now I know why my mom would say, “never go into the basement,” to which I dutifully complied.

When the school year ended, mom enrolled me into a day camp and reading lab run by a church. It was located across the street from Burnside grammar school, the school Principal Pandoffy expelled me from. September came and mom tried to enroll me in the first grade. Pandoffy was still principal so he tried to have me repeat kindergarten. At this juncture, my mother’s rage boiled over.

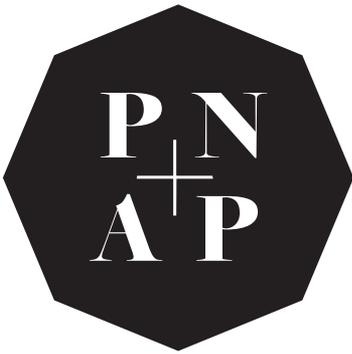
She proceeded to threaten, curse, and taunt the principal until he relented. He reluctantly admitted me to the first grade.

Year later, I realized why the principal had so much animosity towards me. Visiting my grandmother Moma Babe's house one day, she pulled out a photo of my father's childhood classroom. He was the only black child in the photo. The caption at the bottom of the photo read "Burnside" along with the year and a blond haired teacher, named Pandoffy! Pandoffy found out I was the son of a student he didn't like and that justified expelling me.

It all made sense now. I was named after my father. A chip off the old block.



**Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project (PNAP) is a collective of artists, writers and scholars who organize arts and humanities classes for people at Stateville prison. Each year, scholarly and creative work is developed in the prison that is then exhibited in neighborhood galleries. PNAP understands access to education and art to be fundamental human rights capable of transforming people, systems, and futures.**



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