Dear Friends

2020 was a hard year. We’ve experienced wave after wave of social and political crises, posing new threats to the livelihood and resilience of our cherished communities both behind and beyond the prison walls. The pandemic alone has taken a profound toll, and we grieve deeply for those we’ve lost.

PNAP’s work this past year confirms that the challenges we face on the outside are always magnified for those on the inside. We now know that over half a million COVID-19 cases this summer were directly linked to mass incarceration. Messages from family members and harrowing accounts from inside students describing the never-ending lockdowns and lack of access to PPE and medical care confirm that the virus has exacerbated the already existing violence of prison.

Despite these challenges, PNAP has forged ahead with our efforts building bridges of reciprocity between our freeworld and incarcerated community of scholars, activists, and advocates. In the Spring of 2020, we pivoted to correspondence classes with 82 students enrolled and engaged in art, poetry, critical ethnic studies, history, English writing seminars, and the PNAP Think Tank. While classes are still operating via correspondence, in May of 2021 we began to Zoom with our students. In response to the pandemic, we intensified our efforts to lessen the harms of COVID behind bars by throwing our weight toward advocacy efforts and mutual aid organizing, including deepening our collaboration with the Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison (ILCHEP). Given the adjustment period of transitioning our courses to correspondence and the increased ways we worked to support our community members, our annual report was delayed. We are releasing this report to update our supporters on operations during 2020 and 2021 and will release a 2022 annual report on schedule.

Growing Our Efforts

We are also excited to share that PNAP was awarded $873,000.00 over the next two years from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. These funds will support PNAP as we: continue to deliver high-quality post-secondary education to Stateville Prison, including a degree program (the UWW partnership with NEIU); deepen relationships between non-incarcerated and incarcerated scholars, artists, and organizers; and create two years of thematically-related events and projects—culminating in a convening—that will strengthen our movements for racial, gender and economic justice. We now have five staff members and are looking to expand into two new spaces: an office for our staff and an art and cultural community space on the West Side.

As we move into this exciting phase of organizational development, we are grateful for the ongoing support from our PNAP community that makes our efforts possible. Special thanks to Erica Meiners, Beth Richie and Alice Kim for coordinating the Mellon award initiative!
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We are grateful to our Think Tank members—Benny Rios, Carolvosier Smith, Devon Terrell, Eric Watkins, Howard Keller, Joe Dole, John Cumbee, Lonnie Smith, Michael Simmons, and Rodney Love—who have continued to engage in work despite the challenges and hardships of the pandemic.

We have been examining long-term sentencing practices to develop think pieces, policy recommendations, and cultural projects that explore the reach of long-term incarceration while building community across the prison wall. Here is a glimpse of our collective work together this past year.

In February 2020, the Think Tank welcomed Quinn Rallins, then Director of the Justice, Equity and Opportunity (JEO) initiative with Lieutenant Governor Julianna Stratton’s office. Organized by Timmy Châu, the Think Tank engaged in a dynamic discussion about proposed Earned Discretionary Re-entry legislation, possibilities for a corrective clemency campaign, and the need to reverse draconian tough-on-crime sentencing policies that were enacted over the last several decades. This was the final time we would be together before the prison shut down all in-person programming due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, we have done our best to continue our efforts via bi-weekly correspondence packets.

Meanwhile, the Think Tank has been working on a narrative project initiated by Alice Kim, called Humans of Life Row, inspired by the popular Humans of New York photography project, which features stories and photographs of the diverse array of ordinary people on the streets of New York. Our project similarly explores the human beings who, because they are serving life or virtual life sentences, inhabit ‘life row.’

While the oral histories have been put on hold until we are able to meet in person again, Alice has been working with the Think Tank to document one sentence a day as a record of their living history over the course of the pandemic. She also sent in a series of prompts, and Think Tank members’ responses to these framing questions will be crafted into a narrative for individual zines telling the personal stories of each Think Tank member.

Meanwhile, Noelle Petrowski forged ahead, posing open-ended questions about students’ hopes, fears, and inspirations. With the students’ written responses, Noelle created digital collages inspired by each Think Tank member. The collages, along with quotes from the interviews, were shared on Instagram to give viewers an intimate look into the Think Tank. In connection with this project, the Think Tank read Studs Terkel’s oral history of the Great Depression in order to explore the purpose and intent of these stories, and to analyze the style and audience of written oral histories, especially oral histories of marginalized individuals.

Our Think Tank also read Usual Cruelty: The Complicity of Lawyers in the Criminal Injustice System by Alec Karakatsanis, a former public defender and founder of the Civil Rights Corps. In the book, Karakatsanis questions who and what we choose to punish and the susceptibility of punishment bureaucrats becoming desensitized to the harm they inflict on the predominantly Black population that enters the criminal legal system. Our colleague Durrell Washington developed questions that guided a close reading of the book. Durrell corresponded with students about the book while Think Tank members formed their own questions for the author. All questions from the Think Tank were presented to Alec during a compelling virtual book conversation between Alec, Durrell, and Breana Petyon of the Chicago Community Bond Fund that was hosted by the University of Chicago’s Human Rights Lab in November. The entire conversation was then transcribed and shared with the members of the Think Tank.

We were also excited to introduce the Think Tank to opera as an art form. We had the opportunity to discuss the libretto of a work in progress by including a written lecture by Cerise Jacobs, librettist and the founder of White Snake Projects (WSP), an activist opera company. Writings by Think Tank members Joe Dole, Raul Dorado, and Devon Terrell, along with UWW graduates Phil Hartsfield and Eric Blackmon, were featured in the WSP virtual opera production, Death by Life, which premiered in May 2021.

The pandemic has taken a toll on all of us, especially all those who are incarcerated. The suffering experienced behind bars is profound and overwhelming. And yet we have persisted and are deeply amazed at the resilience and determination that Think Tank members have demonstrated over the last year.
We are grateful to our Think Tank members – Benny Rios, Carolvosier Smith, Devon Terrell, Eric Watkins, Howard Keller, Joe Dole, John Cumbee, Lonnie Smith, Michael Simmons, Michael Sullivan, Raul Dorado, and Rodney Love – who have continued to engage in work despite the challenges and hardships of the pandemic. We have been examining long-term sentencing practices to develop think pieces, policy recommendations, and cultural projects that explore the reach of long-term incarceration while building community across the prison wall. Here is a glimpse of our collective work together this past year.

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List of All Classes 2019-2021

Fall 2019
- African Americans and the Civil War
  Johari Jabir, UIC
- Envisioning Criminal Justice Reform
  Clinton Nichols, Dominican University
  Art: Anthems
  Sarah Ross and Anna Martine Whitehead, SAIC, and Aaron Hughes and Damon Locks, Independent Artists
  Poetry
  Tara Bettis, Poetry Foundation, and Anna Martine Whitehead, SAIC

Fall 2020
- Violence in Society
  Beth Richie, UIC
- Introduction to Visual Criminology
  Luke Fidler, University of Chicago, and Jason LaFountain, SAIC
- Economy, Society, and Public Policy
  Damon Jones, University of Chicago
  Poetry: The Lyric Essay
  Audrey Petty, Illinois Humanities

Spring 2021
- Research for Justice
  Lisa Yun Lee, National Public Housing Museum, and Adam Bush, College Unbound
  Race, Class, and Gender Dimensions of Criminalization and Justice
  Julian Thompson, UIC
  James Baldwin and Black Political Thought
  Martha Blondi, Northwestern University
  Poetry: The Lyric Essay
  Audrey Petty, Illinois Humanities
- Writing Our Lives: The Art of Memoir and Personal Essay
  William Ayers, UIC

Summer 2020
- Writing the Brief Biography and Short Learning Statements
  Tara Bettis, Poetry Foundation
- Narrating Social Change
  David Knight, University of Chicago
- Mindfulness to Soulfulness: A Course in Contemplation and Self-guided Meditation
  Johari Jabir, UIC
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Ongoing
- Art: Justice Murals
  Sarah Ross, SAIC, and Aaron Hughes, Independent Artist
- Justice, Politics, and Culture Think Tank
  Alice Kim, Durrell Washington, and Noelle Petrowski, University of Chicago
- Math Tutorial
  Desmond Taylor, Math Instructor
- UWU Study Hall
  Jason LaFountain, PNAP

Leadership Spotlight: Damon & Cean

Who are you? What do you do at PNAP? And what brought you to PNAP?

Damon: I am Damon Locks, an artist, musician, and educator. I am also a member of the Leadership Committee and the board president. I am part of the Art Wing of PNAP, where we teach and coordinate the art classes. I started in 2014 because I was invited by the Jane Addams Hull House to work with PNAP to teach and create work for an exhibition. That first semester we created the Freedom/Time animation, which I was so happy with. As a result I was asked to stay and continue teaching.

Cean: I’m Cean Gamalinda. I write poetry, practice friendship, and listen to Mariah Carey while I go for walks or wash dishes. I am PNAP’s Class Coordinator, which, in a time of pandemic, means that I facilitate with Stateville to organize the exchange of packets between our faculty and our students. I was introduced to PNAP through our mutual friend and collaborator, Timmy Chico, in whose orbit I had for a long time seen & admired the work that PNAP does.

It’s been a difficult and uniquely challenging year given the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact for folks both inside and outside the prison. Do you feel like it has changed, affected, or complicated any of your beliefs about the prison system, or how you approach working through the contradictions of incarceration?

Damon: The world has changed. The stakes steadily rise, but the job and our commitments remain the same. Empathy and resolve is the name of the game. Mental and physical health is centered as it should be always but especially during this crisis. It has been so hard to stay motivated. I have failed a lot in the last 9 months. I am still working to do better. The contradictions are the same: COVID-19 hasn’t really changed that.

Cean: The most fulfilling part of the work so far has been the fact that it still goes on — it looks different, it requires different strategies, its impact is different, but I’m glad to see that we and our students find ways to keep it moving, and I’m grateful to be part of that.

How have you been centering yourself lately? Do you have any tips for staying grounded?

Damon: I find solace and inspiration in art and communication. Actually, art is communication. So, I look for various ways to communicate to center or ground myself. I am a check-er in-er. I want to make sure people are doing ok. I have been writing and playing music and trying to learn more about my art and the conversations I am trying to have with people using my art. I also like to talk about movies and TV series. A critical discussion about some pop culture zeitgeist jam is one of my favorite things to do.

What are some sources of inspiration for you? Can you name some texts or music that you find inspiring?

Damon: I usually most inspired by whatever’s in front of me — the last few days, I’ve been listening to Amanaz, which was a really great Zamrock band. In between the five books I keep trying to convince myself I’m reading, I’ve been really loving A Sand Book by the poet Ariana Reines. I also always return to the poems of June Jordan or Bernadette Mayer, and to interviews with Allen Iverson.

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Sarah Ross and Anna Martine Whitehead, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Aaron Hughes and Damon Locks, Independent Artists
Poetry: Writing Poetry
Tara Betts, Poetry Foundation

Spring 2020
Critical Ethnic Studies and Contemporary Art Practice
Patricia Nguyen and Casey Goenan, Northwestern University
Writing Intensive Seminar: Ideologies in Education
Simone Waller, Northwestern University
At Home In The World
Lisa Yun Lee, National Public Housing Museum, and Ben Austen, University of Chicago
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Aaron Hughes and Damon Locks, Independent Artists
Poetry: Writing Poetry
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Cean: That’s a great response. In the last few days, I’ve been listening to Mariah Carey while I go for walks or wash dishes. I am PNAP’s Class Coordinator, which, in a time of pandemic, means for walks or wash dishes. I am PNAP’s Class Coordinator, which, in a time of pandemic, means
The 2019-2020 year for Art and Poetry started out with big changes, or so we thought. In the prison we moved Art and Poetry classes to empty classrooms in the gym to make space for expanding programs in the school. We built tables and acquired cabinets just in time for the fall semester. As new classes started, the artwork of artists locked up in Stateville was on the move. Works on paper and animations were shown at The Pencil is the Key at the Drawing Center in NY, Walls Turned Sideways at Tufts University Art Galleries in Boston, and Envisioning Justice at the Sullivan Galleries at the School of the Art Institute Chicago. Our exhibition about long term sentencing titled The Long Term was hosted for a fourth time in the region, at Dominican University, where faculty member Dave Pabellon led a class responding to the exhibition. In this unique class, students experienced peace circles and conversations with Michael Tofola and Orlando Mayorga. Both men are doing amazing justice work in Chicago, after decades of incarceration, as alums of the Education Justice Project (a higher education program at Danville Prison). Programming accompanied the exhibition and included a film screening hosted by Clinton Nichols, a workshop by Tara Betts, and performances by Damon Locks and Anna Martine Whitehead.

Back at Stateville, Tara Betts (poetry faculty) and Aaron Hughes, Damon Locks, Sarah Ross and Anna Martine Whitehead (art faculty) were engaged in teaching year-long classes focusing on ideas of belonging. Guests Norris Henderson, Aram Han Sifuentes, and Roberto Sifuentes came to the prison to deliver guest lectures and critiques.

When the pandemic hit, our classes ended abruptly. The prison went on lockdown—for people inside this means 23-24 hours a day in a 6 x 8-foot cell with another person. We were worried about the health of our students, as both the spread of the virus and long-term lockdown have profound impacts. We could not talk with students because volunteers are not allowed to contact students outside of the in-person class belonging. As a member of the IL Coalition of Higher Education in Prison (IL-CHEP), we gathered to figure out what was most needed in the moment. PNAP went to work with coalition members across the state to call for clemencies and releases in order to depopulate the prison and to enact the distancing. IL-CHEP started hosting weekly calls and new sub-committees formed. One group worked on actions for decarceration, and PNAP led the effort to organize artists to make graphics. In addition, Damon Locks and Aaron Hughes made work to support specific actions happening on issues of incarceration, as well as work supporting protests around policing in public schools and police brutality in our nation. All of the work can be found and downloaded on the Just Seeds website.

Our work to support clemencies for incarcerated people continues, but the mass releases we were hoping for didn’t materialize. In addition, we lost a former student, Joseph Wilson, who was also a husband, father and North Park University student. He was just 35 years old. In Sept. we were able to enroll students in correspondence classes, including The Lyric Essay taught by Audrey Petty, while Aaron Hughes and Sarah Ross worked with artists in a class on mural design and history. Throughout the last two years we were able to show art and poetry via online and print presentation at the Block Museum, Pivot Arts, Poetry magazine, and beyond, centering the concerns, critiques, visions, and creativity of artists and writers at Stateville.
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In Sept. we were able to enroll 57 DuSable Museum. In addition, we are working on a project that has been in development in 57th and Cottage Grove Avenue, outside the DuSable Museum. In addition, we are working on a project that has been in development in classes at Stateville for more than a year. The 51st (Free) State is a body of work that engages the concerns, critiques, visions, and creativity of artists and writers at Stateville.
Welcome Home

An Interview with Carl Williams and Cedric X Cal

In the midst of a really difficult year, a ray of sunshine came when several former PNAP students were released. Some were let out on clemencies pushed through because of COVID. Others were sentenced to life without parole as juveniles (an adjudication that was overturned by the Supreme Court in Miller v. Alabama in 2012). In both cases, people were sentenced to die in prison. Due to long-term legal challenges to change laws for juveniles and the amazing work of lawyers from IL Prison Project and others, these former students are now free, living beautiful lives as friends and neighbors. PNAP members were able to welcome people home in the fall through a Zoom coming home party. We continue our work with these artists, poets, and writers in the free world. Below is a conversation with Cedric X Cal and Carl Williams.

Sarah Ross: When were you released and how did it feel?

Cedric X Cal: I was released July 20, 2020. It felt surreal finally being released after a long struggle for justice. I was elated and sad at the same time for leaving behind all my comrades who struggled with me in confinement. With freedom there's responsibility that I didn't have before that feels good. I have freedom of movement and freedom of choice. I can choose whatever I want to do or not, at my convenience—it feels soooo good to be free from prison.

Carl Williams: I was released on August 11, 2020, and freedom feels like something that I cannot describe to you, but I will try my best. It is joyous, exciting, bittersweet, and the essence of beauty.

Sarah: Who are you connecting with now that you are free?

Carl: I'm connecting with the people who stood with me in that storm of my life. I know that those are people I can count on and those are the people who love me. Organizations that I am connecting with besides The Nation of Islam are to be determined. I want to work with organizations based on their work in poor communities and with prison reform.

Cedric: Now that I am free I am connecting with family, friends, organizations involving criminal justice, professors, my community, former prisoners, as well as those who are currently incarcerated. Most importantly I've started my own business.

Sarah: What classes did you take, and can you share any specific moment or memory?

Carl: I took Political Theory, Black Women Studies, Poetry, Theatre, Limits and Rights, Criminology I & II. Basically, I've been taking PNAP courses since the beginning of PNAP; there are so many courses to name. I have had my poetry and my writings published in PNAP publications, and I have also donated writings to PNAP. One memorable story comes from the Theatre class. We had to create a story and act it out as well as create a dance. Not one person was willing to even attempt to dance or act silly in the class. The reason why was because of persona in the men’s prison. But, as we sat around in a circle and began to talk about life and make instrument sounds to form a song, we went all of the egos and the burst of laughter and excitement stretched through every inch of that room. Everybody became involved and created their own skits. That left a lasting impression of humor, happiness, and joy, but most of all trust.

Cedric: I took a plethora of classes in PNAP—I took creative writing, African American history, Latin American history, Social movement history, Women’s rights history, Poetry, English literature. One of my fondest memories was meeting the most weird and confident in her skin lesbians, Erica Meiners. She has a beautiful mind and knowledge of freedom movements and has a connection to the Black Lives Matter movement. She shared with the class how she accidentally bumped into the CPD intelligence unit and saw the technology they were using to identify every marcher in the crowd. It was hilarious how she described it. Another thing that is memorable was how all the teachers were impressed with prisoners’ eagerness to learn. I remember how they appreciated the classes and always said it was a breath of fresh air when compared to the young adults in their college courses who are distracted through every inch of that room. Everybody became involved and created their own skits. That left a lasting impression of humor, happiness, and joy, but most of all trust.

Sarah: Do you think art and education projects are really needed in prisons? If so, why?

Carl: Of course, art and education is needed in prisons because of what it offers. The ability to grow, learn, and create an environment that enables the entire prison to grow by allowing each person to teach others. In prison, once a person becomes educated, he or she wants to share that knowledge with everybody. It also helps to prevent the violence in prison and brings in communication when it comes to problem solving.

Cedric: I think that art and education is DEFINITELY needed in prison. The Honorable Min. Farrakhan stated that "true prison reform starts with the enlightenment of the inmate, of what the inmate is in reality and not what he or she has become because of circumstances." That starts with education. The majority of prisoners are high school dropouts and functionally illiterate. I never thought I would go to college. I was a high school dropout. Due to my determination to learn I got my GED diploma and attended college courses through PNAP. I would have never done that if the opportunity wasn't given through such an organization, because a maximum prison facility doesn't provide any rehabilitation programs to prisoners with Natural Life and terms over 20 years.

Carl: For me PNAP has been a source and a resource. It has been an intricate part of my life when it comes to my growth and continued elevation both inside the prison and outside the prison. PNAP has provided me with the ability to constantly grow into who I am. PNAP has afforded me the opportunity to teach others and lead by example when it comes to life, liberty, freedom, wisdom, love, and—more importantly—in giving back. Again, I stress that the education courses of PNAP are important to someone like me, as it has helped me when it comes to starting my own business and creating other opportunities for others who are incarcerated and formerly incarcerated.
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An Interview with Carl Williams and Cedric X Cal

In the midst of a really difficult year, a ray of sunshine came when several former PNAP students were released. Some were let out on clemencies pushed through because of COVID. Others were sentenced to life without parole as juveniles (an adjudication that was overturned by the Supreme Court in Miller v. Alabama in 2012). In both cases, people were sentenced to die in prison. Due to long-term legal challenges to change laws for juveniles and the amazing work of lawyers from IL Prison Project and others, these former students are now free, living beautiful lives as friends and neighbors. PNAP members were able to welcome people home in the fall through a Zoom coming home party. We continue our work with these artists, poets, and writers in the free world. Below is a conversation with Cedric X Cal and Carl Williams.

Sarah Ross: When were you released and how did it feel?

Cedric X Cal: I was released July 20, 2020. It felt surreal finally being released after a long struggle for justice. I was elated and sad at the same time for leaving behind all my comrades who struggle with me in confinement. With freedom there’s responsibility that I didn't have before that feels good. I have freedom of movement and freedom of choice. I can choose whatever I want to do or not, at my convenience—it feels sooo good to be free from prison.

Carl Williams: I was released on August 11, 2020, and freedom feels like something that I cannot describe to you, but I will try my best. It is joyous, exciting, bittersweet, and the essence of beauty.

Sarah: Who are you connecting with now that you are free?

Carl: I'm connecting with the people who stood with me in that storm of my life. I know that those are people I can count on and those are the people who love me. Organizations that I am connecting with besides The Nation of Islam are to be determined. I want to work with organizations based on their work in poor communities and with prison reform.

Carl: Now that I am free I am connecting with family, friends, organizations involving criminal justice, professors, my community, former prisoners, as well as those who are currently incarcerated. Most importantly I've started my own business.

Sarah: What classes did you take, and can you share any specific moment or memory?

Carl: I took Political Theory, Black Women Studies, Poetry, Theatre, Limits and Rights, Criminology I & II. Basically, I’ve been taking PNAP courses since the beginning of PNAP, there are so many courses to name. I have had my poetry and my writings published in PNAP publications, and I have also donated writings to PNAP. One memorable story comes from the Theatre class. We had to create a story and act it out as well as create a dance. Not one person was willing to even attempt to dance or act silly in the class. The reason why was because of personas in the men’s prison. But, as we sat around in a circle and began to talk about life and make instrument sounds to form a song, so went all of the egos and the burst of laughter and excitement stretched through every inch of that room. Everybody became involved and created their own skits. That left a lasting impression of humor, happiness, and joy, but most of all trust.

Cedric: I took a plethora of classes in PNAP—I took creative writing, African American history, Latin American history, Social movement history, Women’s rights history, Poetry, English literature. One of my fondest memories was meeting the most weird and confident in her skin lesbians, Erica Meiners. She has a beautiful mind and knowledge of freedom movements and has a connection to the Black Lives Matter movement. She shared with the class how she accidentally bumped into the CPD intelligence unit and saw the technology they were using to identify every marcher in the crowd. It was hilarious how she described it. Another thing that is memorable was how all the teachers were impressed with prisoners’ eagerness to learn. I remember how they appreciated the classes and always said it was a breath of fresh air when compared to the young adults in their college courses who are distracted in class.

Sarah: Do you think art and education projects are really needed in prisons? If so, why?

Cedric: Of course, art and education is needed in prisons because of what it offers. The ability to grow, learn, and create an environment that enables the entire prison to grow by allowing each person to teach others. In prison, once a person becomes educated, he or she wants to share that knowledge with everybody. It also helps to prevent the violence in prison and brings in communication when it comes to problem solving.

Carl: I think that art and education is DEFINITELY needed in prison. The Honorable Min. Farrakhan stated that “true prison reform starts with the enlightenment of the inmate, of what the inmate is in reality and not what he or she has become because of circumstances.” That starts with education. The majority of prisoners are high school dropouts and functionally illiterate. I never thought I would go to college. I was a high school dropout. Due to my determination to learn I got my GED diploma and attended college courses through PNAP. I would have never done that if the opportunity wasn’t given through such an organization, because a maximum prison facility doesn’t provide any rehabilitation programs to prisoners with Natural Life and terms over 20 years.

Carl: For me PNAP has been a source and a resource. It has been an intricate part of my life when it comes to my growth and continued elevation both inside the prison and outside the prison. PNAP has provided me with the ability to constantly grow into who I am. PNAP has afforded me the opportunity to teach others and lead by example when it comes to life, liberty, freedom, wisdom, love, and—more importantly—in giving back. Again, I stress that the education courses of PNAP are important to someone like me, as it has helped me when it comes to starting my own business and creating other opportunities for others who are incarcerated and formerly incarcerated.

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Claiming an Education
An Interview with Phil Hartsfield

PNAP and University Without Walls student Philip Hartsfield successfully completed his Review Board in November and has now satisfied the academic requirements needed to complete his BA degree from Northeastern Illinois University.

Phil’s journey has been a difficult one: He started the UWW program at Stateville in 2017 with seven other men but was transferred to Pinckneyville CC in his first semester. His academic and community advisors, Tim Barnett and Alice Kim, continued to work with him to earn his degree, but without a formal degree program, the move to a prison in southern Illinois and then to Hill CC meant that progress was slow and painstaking.

Phil’s depth of area for his degree is History of Justice: Legal, Sociological, and Psychological Perspectives, and he is now looking into a graduate program he can complete while incarcerated. Phil’s academic success has inspired his high school-age son to look seriously into higher education and instilled in him the will to use education to help create the world we need and deserve.

Alice Kim: How would you say you’ve changed over these last few years because of your efforts pursuing your degree?

Phil Hartsfield: I can see things much clearer now. I mean I’m sitting in prison, and I’ve essentially got a life sentence and there’s no way out. You’re just wandering aimlessly, to an extent. You don’t really necessarily have a purpose. I mean I’m sitting in prison, and I’ve seen the effect of educational programs.

Alice: Building on that, I want to ask you what you learned about yourself as you pursued your degree?

Phil: That’s like, a huge question, you got enough time? (laughs) I learned so many things. One of the most profound things that I learned is that I’ve had a lot of my own prejudices that I probably didn’t think that I had, but I did. You gave us a James Baldwin book to read in one of our classes, prior to me being in the program. I didn’t read it at the time. And you asked about homophobia in prison. And I’m pretty sure I told you, certain things aren’t good to talk about in prison.

Alice: It’s prison. But then as I go through things and I learn things and I educate myself and then I see some of the people who have reached out, and like I said, I had to really shed some of my own prejudices ‘cuz if I’m asking people to think about myself and my situation and learn so many different things, then I have to learn too.

Eventually I read James Baldwin and I was like, man, this is a deep dude! I literally just listened to a podcast about him. I was listening to him talk about, I believe it was when Malcolm X got killed. I thought about how hard it must have been to be that outspoken at that time. Not only a black man, but a gay man. Just thinking to myself, like, wow.

I didn’t hear about certain things when I was in the world. Why do I care about things now that I’m in prison? It made me question so many things, my identity, my perspective on things, why I view masculinity differently here than I did it out in the world.

Tim: I’m wondering how education opened new ways for you to challenge things and made you more productive or different in some way?

Phil: Like I said, empowering, using my brain, just my mind. I’ve seen the effect of reading as much as I can. Passing that knowledge on, so that we can all fight.

I’m pretty sure a general would love to win the war without a gun, but with a sharper mind, or stepping foot on a battlefield. And so how do you do that? You have to come up with the best strategy. And in order to come up with the best strategy, you have to study.

It’s the same format. I have to educate myself to defeat whatever enemy it is. This isn’t to say everyone’s an enemy. But I’ve been fighting my whole life. I look at things as oppressor and oppressed. Right now, I’m the oppressed. You know what I’m saying? I’m looking for social justice. So if we’re looking for social justice, I have to find a way to defeat the enemy. The enemy right now is some form of oppression, so how do I defeat that? It comes in many forms, and I have to look for how to defeat it. Right now, it’s figuring out a solution.

Alice: Here’s a more practical question. Can you describe your study practices or the kinds of habits you developed over the last few years?

Phil: With bipolar PTSD, it’s hard to form habits. (laughs) I feel like my brain doesn’t function like a normal individual. You see my chicken scratch. You know I can’t spell. That’s like my notes, you would just be like, what the hell’s that? I got stuff all on the sides, and upside down, and sometimes it barely makes sense to me. It might take me three days to realize, ohhh, so that’s what I mean, alright. It made sense to me at the time, you know what I mean?

Alice: (laughs) Happens to me all the time.

Phil: I read, write stuff in the books, write this, write that, write that. I’m a procrastinator. But it all formulates in my head. Like, I might sit there and be looking at something on the TV, and all of a sudden, that thought comes to my head and I have to write down like three, four sentences. And then, two days later, that fits in with something that I’m reading and it just kind of comes together. Like that “Don’t Call the Police” essay, that literally came to me, that took five minutes to write. The “Release the Wolves” essay, that took two months, three months. I also read a lot, and all the time.

Alice: You’ve talked about how getting an education, or earning your degree, has had an impact beyond yourself, that it’s impacted your son, impacted your family. Can you talk about that?

Phil: I think every parent’s fear is their child not succeeding in life. Obviously, me being incarcerated has impacted my mother. And statistically, the child with incarcerated parents, they’re not expected to be X, Y and Z. With me not getting a degree, hopefully, he’s able to shoot up. But simply by reading some of my writing, he hears this, he sees this, and now he wants to be a writer.

Not too long ago I didn’t think he was going to graduate high school. Now he’s loving creative writing, and he should be graduating from high school. And he’s talking about college, like legitimately talking about college. He’s really into reading, and I’m like, that’s not something that’s been in our repertoire. If that’s the only thing that came out of this, I’m completely good with that.

Editor’s Note: Phil is submitting a request for clemency to the governor and also has a re-sentencing case pending that would allow him to get out in the next several years. He is now enrolled in a graduate degree program to earn a Master’s in Criminal Justice.
Claiming an Education

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Phil's journey has been a difficult one: He started the UWW program at Stateville in 2017 with seven other men but was transferred to Pinckneyville CC in his first semester. His academic and community advisors, Tim Barnett and Alice Kim, continued to work with him to earn his degree, but without a formal degree program, the move to a prison in southern Illinois and then to Hill CC meant that progress was slow and painstaking.

Phil's depth for his degree is History of Justice: Legal, Sociological, and Psychological Perspectives, and he is now looking into a graduate program he can complete while incarcerated. Phil's academic success has inspired his high school-age son to look seriously into higher education and inspires all to use education to help create the world we need and deserve.

Alice Kim: How would you say you've changed over these last few years because of your efforts pursuing your degree?

Phil Hartsfield: I can see things much clearer now. I mean I'm sitting in prison, and I've essentially got a life sentence and there's no way out. You're just wandering aimlessly, to an extent. You don't really necessarily have a purpose. I mean, you do, but you don't, you know? You try to find meaning in meaningless things, and you don't have anything. And so, then I had something. There were people in my life who were willing to sacrifice and be loyal and help me gain resources, so it really gave me meaning.

Tim Barnett: A lot of people say that higher ed in prisons, especially for people with long-term sentences, is a waste of money and a waste of time for the kinds of reasons you're mentioning, like you're not getting out. What would you say to that?

Phil: Prior to me coming into the program, I had recently been let out of administrative detention for some 'not-so-nice things,' I'll say. I wanted change in my life. Because the path that I was going on was not positive, it was not good. You know, everything else I tried before, it wasn't leading anywhere good.

So, to the naysayers and people that think that people are serving long term sentences should not get an education, I say they don't know what the hell they're talking about because 1, they've probably never been in prison; 2, they've probably never dealt with anybody that has been in prison; and 3, more than likely, they'll never change their mind either way.

I've seen the effect of educational programs. And probably the most positive programs that they have--of the education programs--are peer-oriented programs, the ones where people like myself who have been through those programs re-teach other individuals within those prisons. They work. And regardless whether you're in, or you're getting out at some point, or if you hope to get out at some point, yes, people can change. And how do we change as a society? We change as a society by treating individuals like human beings. You don't slap somebody and tell them not to slap somebody, that doesn't make sense. You don't put out a fire with more fire.

Alice: Building on that, I want to ask you what you learned about yourself as you pursued your degree?

Phil: That's like, a huge question, you got enough time? (laughs) I learned so many things. One of the most profound things that I learned is if you ever had a lot of my own prejudices that I probably didn't think that I had, but I did. You gave us a James Baldwin book to read in one of our classes, prior to me being in the program. I didn't read it at the time. And you asked about homophobia in prison. And I'm pretty sure I told you, certain things aren't good to talk about in prison.

I mean it's prison. But then as I go through things and I learn things and I educate myself and then I see some of the people who have reached out, and like I said, I had to really shed some of my own prejudices 'cuz if I'm asking people to think about myself and my situation and learn so many different things, then I have to learn too.

Eventually I read James Baldwin and I was like, man, this is a deep dude! I literally just listened to a podcast about him. I was listening to him talk about, I believe it was when Malcolm X got killed. I thought about how hard it must have been to be that outspoken at that time. Not only a black man, but a gay man. Just thinking to myself, like, wow.

I didn't hear about certain things when I was in the world. Why do I care about things now that I'm in prison? It made me question so many things, my identity, my perspective on things, why I view masculinity differently here than I did it out in the world.

Tim: I'm wondering how education opened new ways for you to challenge things and made you more productive or different in some way?

Phil: Like I said, empowering, using my brain, just my brain, putting this reading up with as much ammo as I can. Passing that knowledge on, so that we can all fight.

I'm pretty sure a general would love to win the war with bullets. But I'm more about coming up with my best weapon, just loading it up with as much ammo as I can. Passing that knowledge on, so that we can all fight.

And how do you do that? You have to come up with the best strategy. And in order to come up with the best strategy, you have to study.

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Not too long ago I didn't think he was going to graduate high school. Now he's loving creative writing, and he should be graduating from high school. And he's talking about college, like legitimately talking about college. He just took the SATs. That's not something that's been in our repertoire. If that's the only thing that came out of this, I'm completely good with that.

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Classes
Two Years in Review

2020 reminds us that radical teaching and learning in community is more important than ever.

There are numerous highlights from PNAP’s teaching and learning in 2020. PNAP participated in and facilitated multiple events designed to strengthen socio-political movements and to elevate the leadership and analysis of currently and formerly incarcerated scholars: check out the panel discussion on The Long Term: Working Toward Freedom in the COVID-19 Moment and Beyond and an American Studies Association 2020 Freedom Course (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFnau6ShMNg). We continue to deepen our contributions to local and national dialogues and organizing surrounding “education in prison,” particularly our work with the Freedom to Learn campaign in Illinois and the Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison. Our PNAP community members continue to amplify the analysis and work of our inside community members—check out Stateville Stories on the National Public Housing Museum website, from Lisa Lee and Ben Austin’s class in spring 2020: https://www.nphm.org/stateville-stories. We have welcomed a new cohort of five students to our University Without Walls degree program, and so much more.

Most important has been the collective work to support people during COVID-19. Essentially all of the prisons in the state of Illinois (and if news reports are accurate, across the nation) have been on “lockdown” status since March 2020: no outside visitors, very little movement, and no in-person programs. These conditions are horrific, and our PNAP community members inside Stateville report high levels of stress and anxiety. While participating in our courses has likely been distracting—and, we hear, also rewarding—COVID-19 has exacted a higher penalty on people inside prison (and their loved ones in the free world). As of Summer 2021 there is a partial lockdown. While programs still operate through correspondence, students are now able to receive family visitations.

While COVID has changed, temporarily, how we deliver instruction, it has not decreased the number of learning opportunities offered by PNAP. Due to COVID our courses have primarily been delivered via a correspondence. Our faculty organize their syllabi into two week modules for students that include readings, typed-up lectures and/or notes, discussion activities (for people to share with anyone available, as they might not be housed with other students), writing and other assignments, and other supplementary learning materials. The syllabi and the course materials (typically books and readers) are delivered at the start of the term, and every other week we drop off packets and pick up work from the prison. Each packet also includes a cover sheet that operates as a check-in—i.e. how are you doing?—and an opportunity for students and faculty to share ideas that might be outside of the readings and assignments of that module. PNAP scans all of the material sent from the prison by students and sends it to faculty electronically. Faculty offer feedback to each student and either scan this feedback for us to print out, or we pick up print copies from faculty, and then we return packets of assessed work to people inside with subsequent modules.

This cumbersome model has a few benefits that we have aimed to deepen in Spring and Summer 2021. As some faculty are also teaching a ‘free world’ version of their class, we will secure permission for faculty to share assignments among their outside and inside students—and faculty have created peer-to-peer structured feedback and engagement assignments (this was not possible before COVID-19). These assignments permit students to see each other’s work and share ideas and grow learning communities.

As the pandemic continues through 2021, we know the crisis is far from over.
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Vision for the Future…

For PNAP, the future of our work is anything but certain. From COVID-19 to the rise of white-nationalist extremism, the political crises of 2020 shifted the terrain of struggle for social change advocates in many ways, including the work to challenge mass incarceration.

Despite the recent popularization of abolition in some mainstream discourse, ‘law-and-order’ politics remains the status quo for politicians and many communities across the spectrum, where increases in state and federal funding for policing, ICE, prisons, and the military remain unquestioned.

While we celebrate our recent Mellon Foundation award, we are also aware that our ability to provide long-term, high-quality programming inside prison, as well as significant cultural and community work throughout Chicago, depends on ongoing financial support from advocates like you.

Funds ensure that we’re able to maintain programming and organizing for our communities on the inside and outside, and to continue to bridge the divide between the two. Your support also ensures our students have access to radical learning spaces. We’re eager to grow with your support.

Please consider supporting our efforts by making a donation as we expand the scope of our work. Our paypal can be found here: paypal.me/artsprison. You can also provide support by keeping up with us on our website, p-nap.org, and social media platforms.

@artsprison  @pnap_il  @pnapchi

Images from

Carving Out Rights from Inside the Prison Industrial Complex

Charles McLaurin, 2018

Juan Luna, 2018

Carlos Ayala, 2018
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Derrick Parks, 2019

From the 51st (Free) State Project

Antwan Tyler, 2019

From the 51st (Free) State Project
2020-21 Annual Report