Current Partners and Funders

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
Arts Work Fund
Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events
Chicago Racial Justice Pooled Fund
Crossroads Fund
Field Foundation of Illinois
Illinois Arts Council Agency
IGRB Foundation
Illinois Humanities
Northeastern Illinois University
Poetry Foundation
Pozen Center Human Rights Lab and Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture at the University of Chicago
School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Sparkjoy Foundation
Woods Fund Chicago

2022 Gala Sponsors, New Beginnings and Worldbuilding Tier

The Toscano Family

Pozen Center Human Rights Lab and Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture at the University of Chicago
Organization and Staffing Roles

PNAP is composed of board-members, co-directors, staff, and faculty. Co-directors meet every other week and vote on decisions about the project. Members of the PNAP Board of Directors help shape and support the overall vision and sustainability of our organization. A group of dedicated advisors made up of current and past faculty and students provide additional feedback and support.

Directors of Art and Exhibitions
Damon Locks and Sarah Ross

Directors of Community Building
Alice Kim and Timmy Châu

Directors of University Curriculum
Tim Barnett and Erica Meiners

Board of Directors
Tim Barnett, Eric Blackmon, Alice Kim, Damon Locks, Beth Richie, Sarah Ross, and Erica Meiners

PNAP Staff
Timmy Châu, Managing Director
Cean Gamalinda, Program Coordinator
Eliza Gonring, Communications and Community Organizing Coordinator
Jason LaFountain, Higher Education and Development Coordinator
Gabrielle Christiansen, Assistant Program Coordinator
Pablo Mendoza, Project Manager / Research Fellow
Viva Yeboah, Finance and Accounting

Graduate Assistant
Brockelley Gren

2021 - 22 Interns
Kaleb Autman, Sofia Cabrera, Asha Edwards, Matthew Jimenez, Adriana Martinez-Smiley, Chelsea Wu, and Indigo Wright
Portraits drawn by PNAP students in collaboration with staff member Jason LaFountain.
The past year has been challenging for so many—from the lasting impact of COVID-19 and the devastating war in Ukraine to the recent surge of mass shootings across the country. It seems as if with each day, exacerbated by ongoing white supremacy and capitalist exploitation, new crises wait just around the corner. At the prison, the challenges we face in the free world are magnified, scarcity is diffracted, and adversity is the norm.

Educators, students, and advocates working in and around the prison also face new challenges as the Illinois Department of Corrections ushers in statewide reforms, including the transformation of Stateville from maximum to mixed security, offering more programming inside and bolstering support for re-entry. On the one hand, these reforms read as positive steps toward increasing resources and support for those on the cusp of release; on the other, those at Stateville with long-term sentences have been deprioritized for access to programming and are being forcefully transferred to other prisons around the state, where programming and access to community are sparse.

Whether these reforms will produce better outcomes for systems-impacted communities remains to be seen. What is clear, though, is that through these reforms IDOC has created new hierarchies of access and mechanisms of control over the lives of people inside, including our students. In the midst of these changes, we at PNAP remain steadfast in our commitment to art and education for everybody, everywhere and continue to strategize ways to grow access to our programming.

Over the past year, we also experienced positive changes: after a year and a half of running our classes through correspondence due to COVID-19 lockdowns, our Spring 2022 faculty were able to go back into Stateville and teach their classes in person. PNAP’s capacity as an organization also grew, as increased funding enabled us to hire 4 full-time and 3 part-time staff.

Increased organizational capacity has meant significantly expanding access to our programming and the scope of our advocacy. On the higher-education side of things, anchored by our Higher Education and Development Coordinator, Jason LaFountain, we celebrated the graduation of PNAP Learning Fellows Colette Payne, Joseph Mapp, and Raphel Jackson, all of whom completed nontraditional bachelor’s degrees at Northeastern Illinois University. This summer we are also excited to welcome a third cohort of ten NEIU University Without Walls students working toward their bachelor’s degree at Stateville, and we look forward to celebrating the graduation of our second UWW cohort at Stateville this fall.

Students in our new UWW cohort include: Robert Curry, Benny Rios Donjuan, Tylon Hudson, Chester McKinney, Jerel Matthews, Miguel Morales, Mike Sullivan, Johnny Taylor, David Wales, and Joseph Ward.

And students who will be graduating in the fall include: Michael Bell, Reginald BoClair, Darnell Lane, Juan Luna, and Daniel Perkins.

On the community-building side, thanks to the consistent and committed leadership of our Communications and Community Organizing Coordinator, Eliza Gonring, and in spite of the
challenges to organizing presented by the pandemic, our PNAP family continues to grow. Through skill shares, PNAP salons, newsletters, and our recent “The Future is Now” gala, new bonds of kinship have been woven by and between our community of loved ones, educators, family members, artists, and advocates.

While we cannot be sure what new challenges the future will hold, we can be sure that our collective resolve and resiliency will only increase. Thanks to the clear-eyed leadership of our systems-impacted community, tireless labor of our staff and leadership committee, and growing community of supporters, our networks of care are expanding, as is our ability to shift the culture of carcerality that undergirds the United States prison system.

– Cean, Eliza, Jason, and Timmy
Leadership Spotlight: Beth Richie

Beth Richie is a core PNAP faculty member, a member of our Abolitionist Teaching and Learning Network, and a board member. Additionally, she is the head of the Department of Criminology, Law, and Justice and Professor of Black Studies at the University of Illinois Chicago. The emphasis of her scholarly and activist work has been on the ways that race/ethnicity and social position affect women’s experience of violence and incarceration, focusing on the lives of African-American battered women and sexual assault survivors. She has published numerous books.

Eliza Gonring
How long have you worked with PNAP, and what do you do with us?

Beth Richie
I've been working with PNAP, I would say kind of informally at first, and then gradually more, over the last six maybe seven years. I started by teaching a course like most people do. And then got more involved in thinking through some of the strategic direction that PNAP was taking, then became involved in University Without Walls, as an advisor, and then with thinking about ways that PNAP could expand and the Logan idea. And now I'm on the board. PNAP has a political and emotional hook that kind of got me.

Eliza
You've been involved with PNAP for over half its life. How has your work with PNAP caused you to grow in a general sense, and more specifically with regard to your politics?

Beth
Part of my kind of political, intellectual, and emotional work is to seek out and try to hang onto organizations that are growing and changing, that are intergenerational, and that are doing real activism, growing up as an organization. So I like to work with not like rigidly-structured, clearly-with-a-strategic-plan kinds of groups. I like to work with evolving organizations. That was my relationship with Insight. And that was my relationship with Critical Resistance. And as I transitioned out of working with those two groups, PNAP landed right in the space that I was looking to fill in my activism. You know, sort of activism, volunteer work, board work, teaching work, etc. I grow most when I'm working with people who are also growing and changing. I really like the inside-out relationships that PNAP offers me, that give me a chance to grow. I cherish my relationship with impacted people. It keeps me grounded and clear about what my work is. I love working with younger people who are focused on the same things that I am and so that's the intergenerational part. And I feel like PNAP is a place where I'm constantly learning. I'm in the student role as much as anything else. And I appreciate and value that very much. In my life, both my teaching at UIC and because of my age and parenting, I don't often get the chance to feel like I'm the learner, even though I am, but people don't think of me that way. With PNAP, I get to be a student and an activist along with everyone else, and I cherish that.

Eliza
PNAP is in such a period of growth now, especially with all the new staff and then also becoming a nonprofit. So I'm excited to see where all of that takes us.

Beth
I feel like sometimes with organizations the momentum takes over and you become a thing, even if it's not the thing you want to be. I so appreciate with PNAP the intentional steps toward the next thing, and not yielding to the energy of just grow big, money, you know, more, all of that. It's very deliberate, and I appreciate that. It's how I try to live. And it's nice to be in an organization community like that.

Eliza
We've started to build our board and flesh out what that role will look like for you and Eric Blackmon and others that may join. Where would you like to see PNAP go next? I know you're working on the Logan women's prison pilot with us, as well.

Beth
Yeah, well, the Logan project is a way to articulate a clear feminist agenda for PNAP. And I feel like the agenda is there in
the work, but it's not dusted off and clearly articulated in some way. So that's part of what Logan offers, for me, is a chance for that. And I want to bring that, I hope, to discussions with the board. Again, sometimes you're in organizations where you've got to make sure everyone remembers that gender and sexuality and trans issues matter. That's not how I feel about PNAP, but it's more how to integrate an analysis into some formal articulation of the work. I also am yearning for some kind of sustained, meaningful support and lifting up of impacted people centrally, and I think PNAP is doing that. I want to be more a part of supporting that work. And in my view PNAP is doing that kind of more than anybody else is doing that, any other organization that I know, kind of quietly and around the quiet spaces and with honor for impacted people. I want to be right in the middle of that in any way I can.

Eliza

A lot of what you do with us and your work outside of PNAP focuses on matters related to gender and sexuality and how the prison system impacts those. Why do you feel like it's important to be so explicit in pointing to that?

Beth

Well, it seems pretty clear to me that the potential for abolition is only realized when it is a feminist project. And that requires us, at least in the world of PNAP, to think about how the prison and the spaces inside where we work are defined by gender and sexuality. And it's profoundly gendered. It's a

male prison, after all, that's steeped in hierarchy. And institutional control that is based on patriarchy, it almost requires a different way of excavating it and looking at it more carefully, because it's so obvious. So, ironically, the obvious nature of it makes it harder to address because it's so omnipresent. And so the work of abolition within PNAP means that we have to constantly not take for granted that we are working on a feminist project at the same time that we're working on an abolitionist project. Some places it's easier to say, "Don't you see how that's about controlling people's sexuality?" Or "don't you see that there are institutional relationships based on gender hierarchy?" You don't have to say that when you walk into Stateville. It's a particular challenge. And, for me, that's what's exciting, and also makes it more complicated to say, we're going into what is probably the most obvious form of patriarchal violence. When we go-every time we go in to teach-what are we doing about that? At the same time, we're trying to make sure our readings get in and our students get their assignments back, and we write the letters that they need for their various cases, etc. So how do we bring that very macro-level analysis to the everyday work of teaching inside.

Eliza

Once we are able to start regularly teaching at Logan, how do you think that will expand our engagement with the ways prisons are patriarchal?

Beth

Again, we're gonna go in as students, that's what's so exciting about going into Logan. There's the obvious ways that people like Monica [Cosby] have taught us that the prison is like patriarchal violence, the ways, especially at women's prisons, that bodies are controlled, access to resources are controlled, emotions are controlled. But I think there's something more nuanced that we'll learn about once we're students at Logan, as we're teaching about how patriarchal violence has impacted the people who are at Logan, while also learning how patriarchal violence and patriarchy itself impacted people at Stateville. I almost feel like a lens into our students at Stateville will be opened up through our work at Logan, which is going to be really exciting for us. At one point I was teaching, showing a video to students at Stateville about girls in detention. And the Stateville students' minds were opened and their hearts seemed connected. They'd never seen the inside of a women's prison or what girls and women go through when they're in a particular kind of detention. And I felt like, there's this parallel universe that happens because there's such explicit gender binaries, segregation in prisons, it's a chance for a kind of cross-learning. I'm really excited about that.

Eliza

This next one was inspired by the first time I went into the prison, with Jason. And once we entered Romeoville, the town outside Joliet, he was pointing to all the different fast food restaurants and the
Walgreens and telling me about everyone's different ways they cope right after they leave the prison. And I started thinking about that—what do you do right after the prison—but also, what are we doing for ourselves, since this is such intense work? What do you do for yourself to help deal with the heavy nature of this work?

Beth
I often derive that through quiet in my car. The last few times I've taught there, I've been going by myself, whereas when I first started teaching there, I carpooled with four other people. And those were two different processes of leaving and re-entering. With the collective, we all got our snacks, it was very focused on physical nourishment, we all had snacks and water. And this may be a weird analogy, but after someone dies, people often get together to eat or drink. And it almost felt like that—like that kind of coming together, sharing stories and replenishing our bodies, with nutrition and hydration. Even though it was often junky food. But it was a shared experience driving back. When I'm driving alone, it's more like a shedding, like I have an urge to drive with the windows down, not listen to anything on the radio. Think about taking a shower, when I get home, there's a kind of clearing of the air, and what it's like on my clothes, sort of a shedding. But in either case, I learned about this when I was a much younger person going into Rikers Island in New York, which had a similar feeling of driving back and forth. I always just feel a—not a sadness—but a little bit more committed, a little bit stronger, a little bit clearer, a little more ready. I start to get ready for the next time I'm going in. And, for me, it's so linked to having the privilege to drive away from that building. And that takes over anything that's like, "Oh, that was terrible" to "Wow, that was powerful," or "I can't stand that place," too. I'm so grateful that I had the chance to go in and help make the place just a little bit more tolerable for a few hours, once a week or however often I go. So I leave, kind of signing up again for the work, almost every time I'm in, whether it's the communal eating and sharing stories or the washing away, or blowing away of the energy. It's always with, "Okay, I got to leave." So I have to figure out how I'm going to go back, even with more strength and power and readiness and humility to do the work.

Eliza
That was so nice to hear. I know for myself, I'm always stunned by how much confronting the reality of anti-Blackness that closely doesn't leave me debilitated, but helps increase commitment to the cause. Because I think it's something that can be so terrifying and that makes you stop.

Beth
Absolutely. And yes, I feel like, "Wow, what strong, amazing, smart, generous, funny people there are there, like, I want to see them again." Not like, "Oh, their life sucks," you know, "it's all fucked up." And I very seldom feel that despair. I often feel hope and recommitment, you know?

Eliza
What has been keeping you grounded or motivated lately?

Beth
Yeah, wow. PNAP. Working on and finishing Abolition. Feminism. Now, with Erica [Meiners] and Angela [Davis] and Gina [Dent]—that really got me through the pandemic. Because we started it right as we were closing down, and then moving through the racial uprising and all the changes in our life, it really helped to have a project like that, that had a start and a finish. That was very, very important to me—life-saving, in many ways—soul-enriching. You know, I have a lot of chosen family. It's similar to my work in gender violence; there's a lot of terrible, terrible despair that happens to people's lives. But I've got people who are life-long friends, like sisters, to me—we laugh and travel and Zoom and care for each other's kids. And so I guess this community of care, that I've had since I started doing gender violence work forty years ago, that I depend on it regularly. And that's sustaining to me. Sometimes when I'm talking to people who don't have that, I can't imagine getting through the days we're living through without people to laugh with and bring joy to my life. And when that wanes, when I'm not attending to that, as well, I can feel that in myself, so I work hard to maintain that.

Eliza
Okay, this is our final question. Often when I think about being involved in the movement work as a primary job, I think about the fact that I'm doing it because I believe in
it, and sometimes I will sit back and I'm like, "I don't know if I enjoy this." But I also don't know if I enjoy labor. I often like to fantasize and think about things, what careers I would like to go into if they wouldn't have the conditions of capitalism or prisons, or even if I was just like, "I'm gonna go back to school and become a biologist." And so I guess for you, if various things change, maybe we don't have capitalism, maybe we don't have the current labor structure... What if you woke up one day and you're like, I'm going to be a chef? What job do you think you would have to occupy your time?

Beth
Oh, mine would definitely be in a bookstore somewhere. Books are sometimes my very best company. And, you know, they're like living things for me. My mother was a librarian, so I grew up with books being essential. And I think I would have worked in a little bookstore and maybe do different kinds of writing. I like to write—well, I don't really get to do it much. But when I do, I like to write more fiction and, like, children's books, I'd love to write. Or maybe a librarian, although that is often a little more transactional. I'd like to sit in the space of the bookstore and put the books away and decide what should be displayed out versus in and all of that, that would definitely be what I would do.

Eliza
Yeah, I also considered that. I was like, "Maybe I'll go back to school for library sciences." And then I looked into it and I was like, "Oh, that's not as glamorous as I thought."

Beth
It's not, it's hard work. The reason books are so important, I think people work out a lot of things through books. And I remember hearing stories—my mother was a reference librarian. So people would come in saying, I want information about a trip I'm taking to Spain, or pancreatic cancer, or this whole range of things that people are looking for information about, but often what they're looking for is help or comfort, or escape. So I think in some way, she understood that the book was the on-ramp to something else in people's lives.

Eliza
What kinds of children's books are you interested in writing?

Beth
I've had this idea for a book. It's called The Wives Are Also Women. And it's a story of the major civil rights icons, you know, King, Malcolm X, or Paul Robeson and all the people who get so celebrated in children's history of Blackness and Black Studies, and how the people that they were actually married to were incredible activists, as well. Like everyone knows Coretta Scott King a little bit, or Betty Shabazz, or Ric Robeson. But the story would be about them, being in community with each other, like in a kitchen, sitting around a table, talking about the lessons that they learned, as women, as feminists, as wives, as activists, working to influence through their position and in relation to their husbands' work against anti-Blackness. So I have the idea already, but it's never gotten much further than what I just described to you. But I do feel like, again, it's trying to make the mainstream knowledge about Black liberation include the incredible influence of women, right through these men.
“Since the pandemic I’m more cognizant of breathing -- not the involuntary exercise that causes my chest to rise and fall, but the exchange of ideas in a positive environment. To me, that is like oxygen.” This is what Think Tank member Carlvosier Smith wrote in response to the prompt, “What is something you do differently now, since the pandemic?”

His words resonate, because our work in the Think Tank was like oxygen for many of us. As PNAP students struggled through the COVID-19 pandemic, our Think Tank brought the Humans of Life Row project to life to illustrate the everyday realities of “life row,” a euphemism for people serving life or de facto life sentences of forty or more years.

Inspired by the Humans of New York photography project, the Think Tank embarked on a journey of reflection, writing, and cultural production in partnership with the Pozen Center Human Rights Lab team of “free world” students and community partners.

Originally conceived of as an oral history project, Humans of Life Row turned into a writing project when in-person classes were shut down due to the pandemic and correspondence became the only means of communication between PNAP students and teachers.

Together, inside and outside students worked to create two iterations of the Humans of Life Row project: a chapbook entitled “Humans of Life Row: ‘I walk into the future by visualizing it today’” and a 2021 Humans of Life Row calendar featuring artwork by Noelle Petrowski in response to writings by Think Tank members.

The chapbook and calendar are a testament to “the power of written narratives and how we can use words to forge connection across time and space” as Dayo Adeoye said in a blog post she wrote about the creative process.

Collaborating on this project together marked the beginnings of a new community in the making. As UChicago student fellow Dayo put it, “I have not yet gotten the chance to formally meet the majority of the contributors, but through their words I was able to get to know them very intimately. I know who they love, what makes them think, the thoughts (the smells) that make up their daily lives.”

To make these narratives available to the public, the Think Tank enlisted Dayo to create an online website to serve as an archive of all Humans of Life Row materials. This site will make it possible to continue to collect, curate and produce personal narratives of those who inhabit “life row,” to urge connection and community building across the prison walls.

As Think Tank Member Benny Rios said, “The Humans of Life Row project gives me a voice….It allows for people to see that I am as human as they are. I have feelings. I am spiritual. I’m a scholar. I find joy in food. I have a family. I suffer. I am you and you are me.”

Over the last year, at the urging of Raul Dorado, Howard Keller, Benny Rios, Mike Simmons, Eric Watkins and other members of the Think Tank, Alice Kim and Noelle Petrowski also initiated an outside victims’ network. In 2021, about ten individuals met over Zoom with the intention of creating a learning space that centered the voices and experiences of individuals who are survivors of violence or who have lost a loved one to high crime. To quote a participant, “This is the power of written narratives...
Two Fathers’ Road to Reconciliation after the Oklahoma City Bombing. Now that the Think Tank is back to meeting in person and also has the ability to zoom, our hope is that we can find ways to learn from each other and build new knowledge about truth, restoration, and healing from violence.

Our first time back inside the prison last November 2021 was a memorable moment. During our three hours together, our first opportunity to talk with each other since February 2020, Think Tank members shared their stories of survival and endurance. They had survived unfathomable hardships, ranging from difficult hospitalizations and long-lasting illnesses to witnessing their peers dying right before their very eyes, powerless to do anything to help them. Their courage and grace in the face of the unspeakable institutional violence of the prison that they experience every day weighs heavily.

This year, the Think Tank dedicated time and energy to learning about and advancing advocacy efforts in support of SB2333, Earned Discretionary Reentry legislation. The Think Tank was also instrumental in envisioning and drafting initiatives like the Freedom Fighters Awards to celebrate the leadership of Monica Cosby, Colette Payne, and Sharone Mitchell in the movement to end mass incarceration.

As co-facilitators of the Think, Alice Kim and Timmy Chau work to acknowledge, celebrate and build the leadership of people serving long-term sentences. We’re thrilled that Melissa Lorraine joined us as a Think Tank facilitator in 2022.

For Eric Watkins, the Think Tank “embodies the greatest goal of education: to move from information to application and to possibly change the world.”

For Benny Rios, the Think Tank “is a place for action. It means that we have a space to analyze the circumstances that keep us oppressed, voiceless and incarcerated, so that we can effectively strategize on ways to combat the root causes that keep us in these states.”

For Mike Simmons, the Think Tank “is my family, my community, my support team. It helps validate that my story is my story instead of being defined by the status quo narrative that labels me as a person who committed a violent offense two decades ago.”

“It takes every ounce of my energy to resist succumbing to this slow death sentence, this mechanism of full-on punishment with very little to zero recognition of our very humanity,” Mike said. “I’ve been able to resist the compounded trauma of incarceration and begin my own process of healing….I’m tired. Aren’t you? But there’s so much to do. Still so much humanity to prove.”

We honor all those in our Think Tank who persevere and remind us of the work we have cut out for us. There is “still so much humanity to prove.”
Course List

PNAP offers college-level courses in a variety of subjects and fields. The 2021-22 school year introduced new faculty to the PNAP community as well as new subjects, such as our first (and very popular) biology course. This school year was also the first time since Spring 2020 that we have been able to consistently host in-person classes. With Cean Gamalinda and Jason LaFountain developing a new faculty intake system, we hope to continue to welcome new faculty and areas of study to our program.

Ongoing

UWW Study Hall
Faculty: Jason LaFountain, Tim Barnett, and Alan Giuliani

Justice, Politics, and Culture Think Tank
Faculty: Alice Kim, Maria Dikcis, Timmy Châu, Melissa Lorraine

Fall 2021

Correspondence on Current Biology Topics
Faculty: Beth Reinke and Aaron Schirmer

Tracing the History of Japanese-American Incarceration During World War II
Faculty: Fred Sasaki and Cean Gamalinda

Contemporary Feminists Engagements
Faculty: Beth Richie, Erica Meiners, and Anna Martine Whitehead

Two Centuries of Black Poetry: A Generative and Analytical Poetry Course
Faculty: Tara Betts

Drawing: Observation and Invention
Faculty: Claire Pentecost

Math Tutorial
Faculty: Alan Giuliani and Nick Moreno

Spring 2022

Portrait as Mosaic: A Reading and Writing Intensive Seminar
Faculty: Audrey Petty, Jill Petty, and Ben Austen

Printmaking: Portraits of Change
Faculty: William Estrada and Hanna Gibson

Youth and Social Movements
Faculty: David Stovall and Emily Pierce

Shaped by Spaces: Human Relationships with Built and Natural Environments
Faculty: Tess Landon

Modern Mathematics
Faculty: Alan Giuliani

Summer 2022

The Evolution of Hip-Hop
Faculty: LaTasha DeHaan

Practicing Public Health: Healing Communities, Healing Selves
Faculty: Evan Lyon and Sam Chen

Alternative Justice Systems: A Comparative Exploration for Liberation
Faculty: Marina Bell and Clinton Nichols

Reading and Writing Short Poems
Faculty: Meredith Nnoka

Abondans: Worldbuilding and Afrofuturism
Faculty: Indigo Wright and Timmy Châu

Art Workshop
Faculty: William Estrada
The past year has seen a lot of activity in PNAP’s academic programs, as COVID-19 continues to affect everything we do. We had only erratic visits to teach classes in person, as COVID waned and then advanced during the fall and winter. Our main educational vehicle was correspondence. We especially appreciated the dedication of PNAP staff members Cean Gamalinda and Gabrielle Christianson during that period; they gathered materials, scanned them, drove them to the prison, and picked them up from the prison, making education possible for students and faculty. Cean also took over when faculty could not teach and kept the whole organization moving and focused, while Gabby has been an excellent addition to the team. We appreciate all that she has to contribute, from class coordination to research assistance, to organizing and archiving the work completed by students and faculty.

Since March 2022 we have been running classes in person again, and sharing space with students has been a reminder of how important it is to learn together, to speak and listen in real time, to analyze writing and cultural production as a group of individuals with multiple perspectives, and to understand the power of community in the search for greater understanding.

The Higher Education spoke also benefited greatly this year from the hire of Jason LaFountain, a long-time PNAP faculty member and former professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Jason supports our five University Without Walls degree students incarcerated at Stateville (Michael Bell, Reginald BoClair, Darnell Lane, Juan Luna, and Daniel Perkins) and works closely with a group of formerly incarcerated Learning Fellows completing BAs at Northeastern Illinois University. The Learning Fellows are supported financially and academically through a grant from the Mellon Foundation, and they give back to NEIU and Chicago by providing educational workshops on the violence of mass incarceration and possibilities of new forms of justice. Higher Education had the added benefit of Brock Grenn’s work as an NEIU Graduate Assistant this past year. Brock is completing a master’s degree in Urban Community Studies and provided a variety of support with research, programming, and more, for our Stateville students and outside Fellows.

Tim, Erica, and Jason were also busy this year reviewing applications for our third cohort of UWW students. Over the fall, winter, and spring, we received approximately seventy applications for the ten places available. We are very excited to welcome the following students to UWW—they will be officially enrolled beginning this fall: Robert Curry, Tylon Hudson, Jerel Matthews, Chester McKinney, Miguel Morales, Benny Rios Donjuan, Mike Sullivan, Johnny Taylor, David Wales, and Joseph Ward.

All of our students, both inside and outside, are changing the world through their writing, activism, legal work, art, and more. We want to give a special shout-out to Joseph Mapp and Raphel Jackson, who graduated from NEIU with bachelor’s degrees in December 2021, and to Colette Payne (pictured), who graduated in May 2022. In addition, two of our Learning Fellows, Willette Benford and Kilroy Watkins, were appointed Soros Justice Fellows in March, as was longtime PNAP ally and Community Fellow Monica Cosby. The awarding of prestigious Soros Fellowships to formerly incarcerated community leaders reflects a desire to amplify the insight, analysis, and courage of carceral survivors, a desire that PNAP shares. We recognize education as a much-needed opportunity, to bring people together as allies to explore ideas, histories, and cultures, in search of systemic change and greater freedom for all.
With IL Coalition for Higher Education in Prison, PNAP continues to support and ignite dialogues about abolition and education in Chicago and nationally. Over the past year, members of the PNAP community organized panels about teaching and learning for systems-impacted people at Chicago area universities; participated in critical local and national dialogues about COVID and prisons; and continued to shape local and national dialogues about access to education for currently and formerly incarcerated people.

This commitment to education as an instrument of radical possibility has influenced our battle to defend education for people with long-term sentences this year, which is an ongoing struggle. The Illinois Department of Corrections has decided to expand education to more prisons, but, unfortunately, their plan is to do this at the expense of those termed LTOs (long-term offenders), many of whom have been leaders in the rejuvenation of higher education in Illinois prisons. PNAP students old and new have been shipped to other facilities, many of which lack academic or other programing, to make room at Stateville for those with shorter sentences who have been deemed more “worthy” of education by IDOC.

Far too many PNAP students, or potential students, have already been transferred from Stateville, but we continue to fight—alongside the Illinois Coalition for Higher Education in Prison, the Education Justice Project, and others—for the idea that education is a human right and for the brilliant students with long sentences whose humanity is denied along with their right to learn. The battle continues, as does the battle to eliminate the need for prisons, which takes place, in part, through critical education made available to everyone, everywhere.

University Without Walls Students: Second Cohort

Michael Bell by Ruth Poor

Darnell Lane by Ruth Poor

Juan Luna by Ruth Poor

Reginald BoClair by Helen Sanchez-Cortes

Daniel Perkins by Helen Sanchez-Cortes
Learning Fellows:

Willette Benford, Eric Blackmon, Kevin Blumenberg, Samantha Dunn, Raphel Jackson, Joseph Mapp, Orion Meadows, Pablo Mendoza, Chris Patterson, Colette Payne, Richard Rowe, and Kilroy Watkins

Community Fellows:

Sandra Brown and Monica Cosby

Inside the Belly by Orion Meadows

Originally published in *In the Belly*, a new abolitionist journal, Orion wrote this poem in solitary confinement when he had access to neither pen nor paper.

I’m inside the belly, but it’s no folk tale.
It’s the reality of being confined within a prison cell,
and on the gallery throughout the day the convicts scream and yell.
Go ahead, ask me what it’s like, my response—it’s nothing short of a living hell.
Yes, inside the belly is where I reside
Where the organs of men still function, but their hopes
and dreams have died,
as the minutes and hours pass turning into months and then years,
and the passage of time’s marked on the canvas of face-
the consequential sorrow emblemized by their tattoo

...tears.
I’m inside the belly of the beast with no heart
that swallows the prey mercilessly and gnaws on it
incessantly until it rips it apart.
For in the belly, sympathy does not live,
and despite what catechisms teach us, the beast does not forgive.
Right here in the belly is where I have been in the number of the ostracized and the most unfortunate of men,
some unjustly in fetters, others rightfully so for their sins
sentenced to abide in irrelevance and mediocrity over and over again.
Yes, I’m inside the belly, the place which has many names-the can, the slammer, the joint.
Call it whatever you wish, it doesn’t matter it’s all the same.

For I dwell in the realm of shadows and perennial pain
with my mind set on that great moment when this old beast shall be conquered and slain.
This year Art and Poetry was busy with both classes at Stateville and exhibitions around the region. For any exhibition we need art and the artists, so let’s start with our classes over the last year. The situation was challenging, as COVID persisted and more people at Stateville were exposed to and contracted the virus. Decory Franklin, a wonderful and soulful poet who had taken many PNAP classes, died in the spring. We miss him dearly. In addition, a massive transfer of people with long and life sentences occurred with a vision of turning Stateville into a mixed-security prison. Some of the most talented and engaged artists in our classes—Aaron Barnes, Rickey Quezada, and Carlos Ayala—to name a few, were sent to prisons south and west with no art programming. Despite all these obstacles, the Art and Poetry team ran classes throughout the year. Claire Pentecost, William Estrada, Tara Betts, Audrey Petty, Jill Petty, and Ben Austen all taught, despite being moved around the prison to find class space and switching back and forth from correspondence to in-person classes. Martine Whitehead, Andres Hernandez, and Amanda Williams taught a class with direct connections to our outside work during the summer of 2021. They created a class linked to the development of a new PNAP gallery and community space. Students
came up with beautiful visions of what’s needed in a community space on Chicago’s West Side. We have felt so lucky to have seasoned educators and dynamic students who were gracious and flexible to make this difficult year work! This summer we welcome a new writing faculty member, Meredith Nnoka, and William Estrada will continue his spring printmaking class.

Pablo Mendoza and Sarah Ross continue to work on a new gallery and community space for families and kids of incarcerated folks. We’ll be moving into a space on 3703 W. Chicago Ave., owned by long-time west-sider and local barber, Franklin Williams. Currently the space is being rehabbed and we hope to move in by Oct. Our first exhibition will feature comics by Arkee Chaney, who survived over 30 years in IL prisons. At the same time, we’ve continued to feature PNAP work in exhibitions and performances. Pablo, Sarah, and Nasrin Navab, a survivor of torture and incarceration during the Iranian Revolution, worked with a community of formerly incarcerated artists to create art and show it at the Krannert Art Museum exhibition titled “Reckless Law, Shameful Order” in January 2022. PNAP artist Aaron Hughes co-curated an exhibition with longtime PNAP supporter Amber Ginsburg at the DePaul Art Museum called “Remaking the Exceptional,” which featured work by many PNAP artists. The exhibition has provided the opportunity for programming in the form of discussions around issues of incarceration, as well as a performance by Martine Whitehead and Damon Locks exploring materials developed inside our classes. Martine is currently performing and continuing to develop the performance piece FORCE! An opera in 5 acts, with music written by Ayanna Woods and herself. This opera is inspired by Martine’s experiences in prison waiting rooms at Stateville.
**Interview with Pablo Mendoza**

Pablo Mendoza is currently a Research Fellow with PNAP. He creates evaluation tools to answer the burning question: Is a community space that bridges the divide between incarcerated folks and their communities on the outside something we need in Chicago? He has devised and implemented several evaluation tools to get at this question. Pablo is also using his lived experience to inform the development of our gallery and community space, particularly in terms of the traumas suffered by systems-impacted folks. He researches other organizations in order to be in community with them and knowledgeable about best practices in the field of trauma-informed care. The educational pathway that led Pablo to this moment involves the Education Justice Project. This in-prison higher education program introduced him to critical pedagogy, which changed his life forever. Because of this concept he was motivated to exercise his agency and advocate for the voiceless. Presently, he works on the Walls Turned Sideways initiative with Sarah Ross.

Sarah Ross: I was first introduced to art and art-making because my mom was an artist and had all kinds of side jobs teaching art in the neighborhood. We had a ping pong table that she transformed weekly into a table for her art class kids. My mom often gave me and my siblings materials to make art projects to keep us busy. Later, when I was a teenager and was grounded in my room, I made collages, drawings, and sculptures to pass the time. I never thought I wanted to be an artist because I wanted to be different from my mom, but I ended up spending eight years in university making art and, of course, now I teach it. When were you first introduced to art or art-making?

Pablo Mendoza: I want to say that I was first introduced to art by my older brother Jay (Juan). I grew up watching him painting and tattooing. My brother was a hustler who always found a way to make a buck. But, in retrospect, I was surrounded by art. I walked the streets of Pilsen and Little Village and viewed art everywhere. Whenever I visited Mexico I would be surrounded by different modes of art: from murals to commercial advertisements, indigenous art and art crafts created by people with low economic means just trying to make ends meet. In Chicago I was influenced by hip-hop and graffiti. I also grew up Catholic and was heavily influenced by the art I found at church. And I loved cartoons, so there’s that.

Sarah: Back in February 2021 a mutual friend suggested I reach out to you to work with me. You’d been out just a few months. I asked if you wanted to join a research project focusing on the possibility of PNAP starting a gallery and community space for families and kids of incarcerated folks. It’s been sixteen months since that time, and we’ve developed a framework for what we’re calling Walls Turned Sideways and looking for a space to rent. In February of 2021, I couldn't have imagined what our relationship would grow into. We’re co-workers and teammates but you’re also like a sibling to me. We both grew up in large families with siblings who were jokers and made us do grunt work for them. We share a similar sense of humor that has made working with you really joyful. What was your impression when you first started working with PNAP and what has it grown into for you?
Pablo: I really didn’t know what to expect when I entered the PNAP world. I had only had exploitative work experiences and very little social contact for the last twenty-two years. I was diving in blind. The reason I chose to devote my time on this project and not go off and chase menial jobs was the hope of creating something new. You (Sarah) were offering a chance to create change via art. How can I say no to that?

This opportunity has allowed me to exercise the ability to create change. I had been watching the world turn on deceit and envy. I am hoping to build anew with this experience. This platform is growing me personally and professionally. Most of all I have really enjoyed how the relationships I’ve built with the PNAP community are chipping away at the hard exterior I’ve had to develop in order to live inside. It would have taken me years to come as far as I have in these months. It’s been a struggle to cope and re-learn to live life while being bombarded by it. Each and every one of the staff have pitched in and made my re-entry a little easier. You have acted as my guide, and I am forever grateful for your assistance in making sense of this time warp. I have struggled with socialization and have learned many lessons through honest communication and a non-judgmental atmosphere. I hope to bring all of this to Walls Turned Sideways.

I am a firm believer that we are lifelong learners. I hope to learn more from what is to come, including the challenges. I plan to share those lessons at our space and hopefully help others steer clear of mistakes and/or learn positive healing methods to deal with them. I want this for our internal PNAP family, as well.

Sarah: Where do you think we will be two years from now? My dream is that we are able to create a joyous space for people to deeply engage with art created by artists from Stateville and beyond, to show their work. I also hope that WTS is a generative space for families and kids of incarcerated people to convene, create, and build with each other. I think we have created the necessary groundwork for a place both to have hard conversations about trauma and harm and also to celebrate resistance to crushing laws and policies that limit the lives of so many people.

Pablo: You asked me about two years from now, and I have a grand vision for Walls Turned Sideways. I know that this space will thrive because of its mission. You cannot cap light, it will always shine through.

We have had a rough go of it, trying to find a space, but other than that we have had a run of good fortune. I don’t think this happened by chance. The connections we are making, which are breathing life into the programming we intend to offer, are guided by the winds of change. It’s a subtle breeze brushing up against the walls of capitalism and disinvestment. With persistence, we will erode the behemoth and prevail to create something new. We are in the midst of daring to dream. I hope that in two years I look back and laugh at how ambitiously silly this all was. But I have to believe in the dream, even if no one else does/can.

Sarah and Pablo stand outside 3703 W. Chicago, the new location for Walls Turned Sideways.
Looking ahead, PNAP seeks to deepen our commitment to providing radical arts and education to everyone, everywhere. We are excited and eager to announce that this fall a constellation of PNAP educators and community members known as the Abolitionist Teaching and Learning network will be piloting PNAP programming at Logan, a women’s prison located in Lincoln, Illinois. In response to requests from artists transferred from Stateville, the Art and Exhibitions team has started a correspondence art project with artists at Hill prison called “Art Exchange”. On a monthly basis artists at Hill prison send their work out to the PNAP Art and Exhibitions team for critique and discussion. We invite artists, art historians and art critics to join us for this new initiative.

In addition to inside programming, PNAP will continue to weave radical relationships and pollinate resistance to the prison-industrial complex through our community events and exhibitions. Part of this effort includes the emerging Walls Turned Sideways project, which will serve as a hub for PNAP exhibitions, political events, and community-based programming.

For the PNAP team, growth means prioritizing depth over breadth. As we look to the future, we also reflect on the past—what role has PNAP played within the movement to abolish the prison-industrial complex? What contributions have we made as an organization? How do we sharpen and refine our interventions? These questions and more guide us in our efforts to actualize abolition in the present. We remain grateful to our large and growing community, and we welcome all who seek to join us in our fight.

Consider supporting our efforts with a donation. A strong grassroots base ensures we are able to continue the work that feels most aligned with our values while ensuring a level of accountability to community members who support us. We have big plans for this year, and nothing would be possible without our supporters.

Donate here: p-nap.org/donate

Website: p-nap.org  Instagram: @pnap_il
Twitter: @artsprison  Facebook: @pnapchi
Eliza Gonring with members of the REAL Youth Initiative at Community Mural Painting, June 2022.

Erica Meiners (front) and Pablo Mendoza (back) at Community Mural Painting, June 2022.

Closing Reception of “Truth and Beauty in Hard Places,” April 2022.

Spanky, Chris Rivers, and Pablo Mendoza at Community Mural Painting, June 2022.

Damon Locks, PNAP Gala Logo, 2022.
From Love & Protect and PNAP’s Free Them All Seed Quilt