The first snow of the season had already fallen. It was the start of a bitter winter. I was working the chow line in the prison kitchen, scooping ladles of mystery slop onto hard plastic trays. “On the new!” I yelled out, notifying everyone that new arrivals were lining up to get fed. Looking over the motley crew, I saw an outlier amid the usual sea of Black, brown and white faces. He was a tiny little thing. He stood at barely 5 feet and weighed nothing. His silver hair was matted and disheveled. His eyes were bloodshot red. And his skin was weathered from a lifetime of hard work.

The little old man was dressed in one of the thin cotton, mustard yellow jumpsuits designated for new arrivals. He shivered from the cold as he blindly plodded forward with the rest of the scared, tired, hungry newbies. Something stirred within me. I instinctively knew he was Korean.

I walked over to the old man and tapped him on his shoulder. I greeted him in our Hangul language. “Hello father, are you OK?” He looked perplexed. But after a few moments, there was a flash of recognition. I saw his dull, tired, almond-shaped eyes light up because he realized I was talking to him in our native tongue.

Exchanging a few quick words with him, I knew he needed my help. I placed my hand on his little shoulder and told him, again in Hangul, “Everything is going to be alright.” He looked back at me. A thin smile spread across his face, and his weary little eyes started to water as he nodded with understanding.

I volunteered to be his interpreter and was summoned to orientation for the new arrivals. I smuggled him a winter hat, a pair of gloves, a bar of soap and a small bag of peanuts. His fingers trembled as he accepted my meager gifts.

The snow continued to fall on his shoulders. I needed help navigating incarceration. I needed a father.
Write for Prison Journalism Project

WHO: First-time and experienced writers who are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, family members, corrections officers, prison educators and others involved in the criminal justice system or affected by the experience of prison or jail.

WHAT: Submissions under 1200 words. No more than ONE STORY or TWO POEMS per submission per month. Please submit only your best work. Personal requests or business proposals will be automatically rejected.

Facts in your piece must be information you gathered firsthand, not speculation or information that you’ve obtained through someone else. We cannot accept stories about individual cases or that are accusatory about a specific person, group or institution. We do not publish academic research papers, religious sermons or work not intended for a general audience. Any data that is mentioned must be attributed to a source. We reserve the right to exclude portions of your work that don’t conform to this policy.

Writers must sign the PJP Publishing/Licensing Permissions Form. Please write to us to request the form if you do not already have it. By doing so, you grant PJP a non-exclusive, permanent, royalty-free license to edit, publish, reproduce, distribute, transmit, sublicense and archive your work in all forms and media worldwide, including with PJP partners and collaborators. But you continue to own your work and can publish it elsewhere.

We cannot re-edit a story once it is published. If you would like your story taken down — the LION judges offered some moving feedback, praising PJPxInside as “breathtaking, honest, and powerful.” One judge said, “The journalism being produced in these samples is top quality — these are critical stories and they’re not just being told, but being told in ways that can’t help but have impact.” Another judge added, “It was half this good on my best day, I’d be proud.” We are immensely proud of our inside contributors and our lean, scrappy outside team. With only a full-time editorial staff of two (soon to be three!), a handful of part-time staff and a backbench of volunteers, it’s a challenge to keep our heads above water. Knowing PJP’s work matters to a growing outside audience motivates us to keep moving forward. One way we plan to expand our efforts this year is by growing PJPxInside from a bimonthly publication to a quarterly with more training.

You may also have noticed that we are now more selective as submissions have increased. But we hope the journalism industry’s excitement about PJP inspires and motivates you to learn and develop with us. We’re excited for your submissions in 2023.

With appreciation,
The PJP Team

Categories
REPORTED NEWS AND FEATURES: Articles based on reporting and research that tell people about things that actually happened. ESSAYS: Essays and memoirs about something you experienced. OP-EDS: Opinion articles and commentary with a thesis, argument or call to action. POETRY: No more than two submissions per entry. ART: Drawings, sketches, paintings and other art that illustrate scenes of prison life. Please include a short story or a few sentences that describe your artwork. No more than three art works per entry. Artwork cannot be returned. AUDIO STORIES: A recording of yourself or an interview with others, no more than two minutes in length.

WHERE TO SEND SUBMISSIONS
Prison Journalism Project
2503 Philadelphia Pike #1534
Claymont, DE 19703
Photos/Art Only:
PJP Art Department
2625 Alcatraz Ave. #328, Berkeley, CA 94705
Electronic Mail:
STL Connect Network, STL Getting Out and Corelink: pjp@prisonjournalismproject.org
NOTE: STL Getting Out is for messages only, submissions must be sent via EUPS.
Securac and JPay: forw@yahoo@prisonjournalismproject.org
E-mail: submissions@prisonjournalismproject.org

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Subscribe to our email newsletter at prisonjournalismproject.org/inside-story.

Aim to submit no more than one piece per month. We’d much rather see one story that you’ve put a lot of work into rather than three stories that were dashed off.
You Are Never Alone With This Community

BY TARIQ MAQBOOL  |  Tariq MaQbool writes from New Jersey State Prison, New Jersey.

Holidays behind bars have always been a rough time for me. They bring a feeling that can only be understood by someone who has experienced incarceration themselves. So, if you are sitting somewhere caged, perhaps staring blankly outside in the dark of night as I usually am, know that I see you. I get your pain, your hurt and sorrow. I am your fellow writer and a fan.

If you are reading this, then you have joined me and my good friends on a journey together. It’s a sojourn that we started some years ago and now, with all of you along, it has become a caravan. Our destination is a noble cause called hope. And you can only reach it if you all write: to continue to dream. My dreaming continued during when I began a life condemned in New Jersey State Prison some 20 years ago. Back then, I remember sitting alone next to my window staring at my celestial friends through iron bars. It was New Year’s Eve. I couldn’t shake the memory of the sweet fragrance of caramel popcorn and roasted peanuts, of standing next to the big tree at New York City’s Rockefeller Center, looking at the same twinkling stars. The juxtaposition was too much. It felt as if my soul was shattering. After that, years passed like seeping water, carving fissures and plunging me further into oblivion. Then, on a friend’s advice, I started to share my writings. My dream of writing to tell my truth and define my narrative took me on a lonely, seemingly never-ending path. Then, PJP showed up in a small, old two-door, asking, “Hey Tariq, wanna ride?” I smiled and got in. Over our journey, more joined and with the grace of God Almighty, that little car is now the rock star tour bus of Prison Journalism Project.

In the past, I have called PJP a forum, yet it is much more. PJP is a community, and it is a unique one. The unity among its staff, volunteers, supporters and writers makes PJP special, a family.

So, dear family, if in this season you find yourself feeling sad, lonesome and in a dark place, then let me help. Find yourself a window. If you can’t, close your eyes and dream of one. See the dark raven sky with shimmering starlight. Place your hand on your chest above your heavy heart. If tears come out, let them. Now say this with me, replacing your name with mine: “I am Tariq. I am here. We are here. My friends are all around me. Happy New Year!”

Now smile, because somewhere someone is thinking of you, and you are not alone.

Sincerely,

Tariq MaQbool
President, PJP-Chapter of Society of Professional Journalists

I had a biological father who loved me, but cancer ripped him away when I was 11 years old. Then through this serendipitous set of circumstances, destiny intervened and brought me a prison dad to heal my wounded soul. I cooked for him, cleaned up behind him, spent time with him and listened to him talk. I still see his wrinkled face and hear his quirky little laugh as he reminisced about days long gone. Over countless hours in our tiny cage, we talked in Hangul and bonded together as father and son. In a desolate world of incarceration, we found a glimmer of love, happiness and healing. As with most stories, there are highs and lows. Unfortunately, my prison dad had to deal with the reality of his declining health. He had a laundry list of ailments: high blood pressure, diabetes, a broken bladder, a serious case of insomnia and a persistent cough, which would later be diagnosed as lung cancer. As his interpreter, we spent hours together in the prison sick cell waiting to see an empathetic medical professional. I know he felt guilty that my days were consumed with his problems, but I felt this was my filial duty and I loved him.

Once, I remember he hesitantly told me that he was unable to hold down any solid foods and had not eaten anything since the day before. It was the weekend, and the prison’s medical unit was a ghost town. Reaching into my old-school Korean cookbook, I whipped up some jook. For the uninstructed, jook is a bland Korean version of rice porridge that is served to the sick or infirm. It’s comfort food when you are feeling horrid. The preparations are simple enough on a stove top. You need regular rice and a bit of time. But try making this dish in a dingy prison cell, with a rigged up prison-issued tea pot and some rehydrated instant rice. Despite it all, I managed to pull off a copycat version that any respectable halmoni (grandmother in Hangul) would be proud to say was her creation.

I prepared a small table for him. A mug of cold water, a bowl of steaming hot jook, and a juicy and salty hot sauce concoction to dress his bowl. I positioned my prison dad in front of his meal. After a few small spoonfuls, he put the plastic spoon down and started to sob. He grabbed my hand, looked at me and said, “I am Tariq. I am here. We are here. My friends are all around me.”

This essay brings with rich details, scenes and dialogue, bringing to life this writer’s world and the humanity of the people around him. The story resonates with the reader because they can connect to the theme of family and belonging, which will help them connect to the writer and the people he writes about.
Today most stories about prison are written with an outside perspective. Prison Journalism Project has an online publication for incarcerated writers and others who know the system from the inside to take the power of journalism into their own hands, to learn the craft of journalistic storytelling and to share their stories of life behind bars.

**SHARE YOUR STORY**

**Write for Prison Journalism Project**

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Write for Prison Journalism Project

... learn more on **WWW.PRISONJOURNALISMPROJECT.ORG** or contact PJP for our submission packet (see page 2).

The day before Irving’s story was scheduled to run, we asked him what he learned from this process. He wrote back:

1. I must add an extra level of scrutiny to the work that I submit. Because I was working in a bit of a rush, I missed necessary qualifiers and allowed old information to settle in my piece. As Mason said in revision, “Situations are always changing, and that is what we fact-check.” That will be my motto moving forward.

2. I learned the importance of having reference materials on hand. I consulted PEN America’s “The Sentences That Create Us” when I received the assignment. It took a few chapters, including the section contributed by PJP, to find my bearings. I also had an old NYT style guide that I used for the first time. I’d run much of my work through that from now on.

3. I realized the importance of trusting the work I’ve put into my journalism and of embracing the struggle as I work through my drafts.

**A PJP Contributor’s First Byline in The New York Times**

**Here’s how the sausage was made.**

**BY MASON BRYAN | PJP Senior Editor**

Last year, an editor on The New York Times opinion desk reached out looking for a writer — someone who could explain the consequences of decades-high inflation inside prison.

We knew just the guy for the job.

Patrick Irving writes a monthly newsletter about issues affecting the Idaho Department of Corrections community. In the May edition, he reported on extreme price increases at his prison commissary instituted by the Keefe Commissary Network. In some cases, the cost of ordinary items had doubled. Irving had also surfaced information about the cost-sharing arrangement between Keefe and Idaho DOC, which he obtained through a public records request.

Irving had sent PJP a story about these changes. The piece showed, with attributed facts, how the fluctuations of the economy — and the whims of a private corporation — were affecting life inside. During the fact-checking of his piece, Irving wrote multiple times to refine and clarify certain claims and figures after double- and triple-checking — a clear sign of his journalistic integrity.

We asked if he’d be interested in turning his reporting into a personal essay for The New York Times. He'd give it his best, he said.

We knew from our own experience working in newsrooms that no reporter sends a rough draft to a senior editor in New York without at least one round of edits. Just as bureaus want to make sure stories are as polished as possible, part of PJP's mission is to provide similar newsroom support for our writers, so we took first crack at an edit. As Irving's editor, I pointed out assertions to fact-check, paragraphs to rework, and gaps to fill.

When the Times editor requested more context, I addressed what we could from outside, then sent Irving a detailed memo with over a dozen questions. We clarified the sources of facts and figures and painstakingly reviewed the price hikes inside his prison, which were the basis for his story. At one point we had to revise the piece as soon as we edited it because the vendor announced more price adjustments and item changes. Irving's essay, “Prisoners Like Me Are Being Held Hostage to Price Increases,” was published in The New York Times on Nov. 2.

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Prisoners Like Me Are Being Held Hostage to Price Increases

BY PATRICK IRVING

Patrick Irving writes from Idaho Maximum Security Institution, Idaho.

The hole in the sole of my shoe is a problem. The plastic bag I sandwich between my two best pairs of socks can do so much during the day we’re let outside. It protects well against the rain that soaks through my shoe, but Idaho snow is a formidable enemy. The problem is that for the price of a new pair of white Reebok Classics, the cheapest shoes available at the commissary, I could save off hunger pains for a few weeks more. I could continue scrubbing my parts and pieces with a soap bar bigger than the matchbook-size, prison-issued bar. And I could wash my sweaty clothes in a toilet with real detergent.

The reason I’m washing my clothes in a toilet is that I live in the desert just south of Boise, at the Idaho Maximum Security Institution. I’m eight years into a 15-to-40-year sentence, handed down for a roster that’s subject to the whims of the company Keefe Group, which has an exclusive contract with the Idaho Department of Correction. (Keefe is a subsidiary of TRC, a holding company indirectly controlled by Mr. Keefe, its principal equity firm.) The company’s captive clients are limited to shopping once a week from a roster that’s subject to the whims of the company — and the economy. With decades-high inflation affecting Americans everywhere, prices of certain essentials have swelled beyond some prisoners’ ability to pay.

The commissary is sort of like your local corner store. Among its offerings are staples like food, clothing and hygiene products that, for us inside, can make the difference between a clean head of hair and a rinsed head of hair, a bad meal and a terrible meal, a cold night and a freezing night. Inside, some things do come free. We are provided three meals a day, except on Sundays, when we’re loaded up with breakfast and dinner and provided with what we call lunch muffins in between. Toilet paper is on the house, which is not the case at all institutions. We get two toilets. A pocket comb. A plastic foam cup. A sponge. A couple of toilet bars (but no shampoo). A travel-size tube of toothpaste and a middle-finger-size toothbrush. We get a couple of blankets and then one more once the temperature drops. Upon intake, prisoners here receive a state-issued coat and beanie we receive in exchange for money and various other commissary items.

Providing specific prices here is made difficult by the prices set by Keefe. In exchange for exclusive access to our incarcerated population, Keefe rewards the Idaho Department of Correction with a revenue-sharing arrangement that guarantees a yearly minimum of $1.25 million plus 40 percent of the gross beyond an annual base sales target. That’s according to the Keefe Group-IDaho Department of Correction contract I received via a public records request as a result of this arrangement, the two entities are able to benefit from working closely together to leverage market size, usually at the expense of their shared clients.

In April, Keefe Commissary Network, in an electronic message sent to prisoners, announced a blanket price increase. The company attributed the move to the Covid pandemic and its financial impacts on trucking, manufacturing, labor and other parts of the supply chain. The projected damage to our prison wallets was approximately 8.5% for everything that remained on the roster. But immediately after the price-hike announcement, Keefe sent another message, informing us that many staples would be discontinued or replaced with different brands. By May, 1, prices for a two-ounce packet of squeeze cheese had doubled (to 65 cents from 32 cents). Flour tortillas, a staple for many, were briefly eliminated but recently reinstated for $2.03 per eight ounces, a 123 percent increase. Five-ounce sausages were replaced with a three-ounce version at a slightly lower price, but the larger ones are now back — and at $4.27, they cost 64 percent more per pound.

Other items were also swapped out for different brands and sizes, avoiding a technical increase but ultimately imposing a much higher one. Not even honey was safe. After replacing it with a sugar-free version, the cost soared over 130 percent (to $6, from $2.58).

Prices may strike the average reader as inconsequential, but they are a lot relative to what prisoners can earn inside. On the unit where I reside, there are a few paid, resident worker positions — janitors and barbers — but all are currently filled. Assuming a position were to open, I could make a monthly wage of $35 to $40 an hour. The latter income would afford me a sense of pride and dignity, but it would also require me to clean for 200 hours a month. Outside of sanctioned labor exists a variety of other options. In prison you will find plenty of functioning economies built on trades and services, innovation and demand. Some perform repairs on miscellaneous property items; others whip up confections — including taffy and fudge — then offer them to other prisoners in exchange for money and various other commissary items.

Unsanctioned professions can include artist, bootlegger, toy-maker and more. Along with these opportunities are good reasons to not engage. First, the punishments for participating in an unsanctioned prison marketplace can range from verbal lashings to a decade delay in release. Second, dramatic increases in the price of raw materials are leaving little in the margins where profits were once made. A batch of illicit fudge — ingredients can include sugar, peanut butter and candy bars — used to cost approximately $5 to produce, allowing makers to make more than double their return. Today the batch would cost north of $8.

I’m fortunate that I can rely on two sets of recently retired parents, who pool from their savings approximately $200 a month to help defray my costs. But it’s also increasingly untenable, and emotionally difficult, to continue relying on my parents for assistance. Making matters worse, for my family’s financial support to reach me, they must pay Auxo Corrections, a Keefe unit that must be used to send money to prisoners, as much as 22 percent for a $19.99 transfer. If my parents wish to fund the account attached to the prison phone service, which is run by IC Solutions, another Keefe unit, they must pay 38.5 percent in taxes plus a $3 processing fee (on top of the 8 cents per minute IC Solutions charges for a phone call). The decision I have to make is really no decision at all: It’s time once again to top my emergency funds, buy a pair of new shoes ($48.72) and hope they last.

This is a textbook kicker — a style called “bookending” — where the writer refers back to what he wrote in the lead. The lead raised a question, and Irving waited until the last sentence to provide the answer — the reason who reads to the end is rewarded by finding out what choice the writer made.

www.prisonjournalismproject.org
In November, we reached out to PJP writers to help us put together a Spotify playlist, as a gift for those who donated to PJP this year. The final list included 72 songs, recommended by 53 writers. Below is a selection from the playlist. Thank you to all who contributed.

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SELECTION FROM THE
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I was in bed sweating profusely.

It was late, around 2 a.m. Earlier that day Georgia had been hit with a heat wave. The news had reported a high of 112 degrees on the heat index, what the temperature feels like when you factor in humidity. While lying in bed, I reached over to the wall and touched it. The concrete was radiating warmth.

“How in the world is it this hot at night?” I said to myself. Tossing and turning, I even prayed and asked God to take the heat away. “Don’t let nights supposed to be cooler! I mean, come on, God.” I finally fell asleep once the concrete cooled down around 4 a.m.

Only a quarter of Georgia prisons are fully air-conditioned, according to Georgia Public Broadcasting. The radio station has reported that those prisons are generally only partially cooled, which means they might have air conditioning in a single dormitory. Georgia is one of 15 states in the South and Midwest that lack universal air conditioning in their prisons, as reported by the Prison Policy Initiative. At least one still unfinished study linked lack of air conditioning to increases in violence. Many people in prison are susceptible to heat-related illness. And extreme heat has also caused dozens of heat-related deaths in Texas prisons, according to a Texas A&M University report released this summer. At my camp, only one unit has air conditioning. However, the architecture in the rest of the housing units is old and outdated, compounding the heat problem. (This is my opinion based on having been a combat engineer in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.) Even though the planet is suffering from climate change, Georgia still has not outfitted its prisons with proper cooling.

As I sit here in the 23rd year of my sentence, I’ve demonstrated a positive mentality, changed my behavior, and what social justice means to someone who may never be free.

This experience touched me in so many positive ways. It helped me to grow as a writer. I explored topics I would never have considered in prison, including the plight of immigrant children. In one course, we read Daniel Beaty’s play, “Emergency.” The cherry on top was when the actor came into the prison and performed his play live.

It is easy to think that your life is over when serving a life sentence, but that hasn’t been the case for me. Being able to participate and grow through these opportunities has given me hope. There’s a thought experiment that I think explains my point well. Envision a person getting a job flipping burgers. They continually demonstrate quality and efficiency, but their supervisor still does not believe they are capable. They may have to get a better job.

A person serving a life sentence does not have the luxury of leaving if there isn’t room for growth. But because of classes, programs and our desire to change, many of us have excelled beyond real or imagined expectations. The problem is that so many of us are stuck here, growing older and eating up taxpayer money despite our excellence. As things are now, investments in us often don’t make it back to our home communities — communities we have damaged and that we want to repair. Would youth not benefit from those of us who are no longer young, but whose experiences could help to deter today’s violence?

Many of us would love the chance to strengthen and share our knowledge and experience with the younger generations we’ve left behind to make sure they don’t travel the same path we did.

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Hurricane Ian, From My Prison Window
Inside Moore Haven Correctional Facility, prisoners fear for their homes and loved ones as a historic hurricane rips through Florida.

In recent days, southwestern Florida has been battered by Hurricane Ian, one of the strongest storms ever to hit the United States.

From my prison window, I see the razor wire on a nearby fence vibrating violently in the wind. Water has made its way inside through a roof vent, a door and a few windows. We are surrounded by concrete but can still sense the strong winds outside. Power has flickered on and off all day, the water has been turned off and fire alarms have sounded constantly.

Some prisoners are playing poker in the day room while others have been battling sporadic phone service as they attempt to reach loved ones.

Prisoner movement has been curtailed. U.S. postal mail has been suspended until further notice. Staff levels here are minimal, and all meals have been delivered to our unit.

On Sept. 29, prison guards — the same ones who were firing up generators are firing up.

Inmates are finding ways to pass the time. A few prisoners are playing cards in the day room, while others are listening closely to the news. Several men who live in my dorm here in Moore Haven Correctional Facility have homes or relatives directly in the path of devastation. As the eye of the storm passes just to the west of us, we are listening closely to the news.

When I spoke to Christian Heath, he had been trying to reach his parents in Sebring, with no luck.

When Hurricane Ian made landfall, we worried about people incarcerated in Florida. And, being a news organization, we also wanted outside readers to know about how this massive hurricane would impact people inside. So we sent a note to reporters in Florida asking for a story about the scene from inside prison. Eric Finley responded.

It was too hectic for Finley to methodically report and write out a fleshed out piece, so he delivered what we might call a version of his ‘reporter’s notebook.’ Over the course of the weather event, he kept track of what he saw and what he heard, he recorded actions by prison officials, and he talked to fellow prisoners about what they were experiencing, carefully documenting their quotes.

These notes came in piecemeal through JPay. A PJP editor reviewed them, then began compiling, or collaging, them into a news story. The process took two days. The specific details Finley reported stood out immediately — through them, we could build a scene to give outside readers to know about how this massive hurricane would impact people inside. So we sent a note to reporters in Florida asking for a story about the scene from inside prison. Eric Finley responded.

Finley’s notes provide snapshots of life inside prison during Hurricane Ian, including descriptions of the physical damage caused by the storm and the emotional toll it took on prisoners and their loved ones.

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It was a tremendous effort by a journalist inside. Finley transmitted information in real time to an editor on the outside, helping to deliver a vivid picture of a major news event and its impact on incarcerated people.