My First Hours After Prison
At Waffle House and the convenience store, the incarcerated mindset kept coming back.

By Shon Pernice | Shon Pernice writes from Kansas City, Missouri.

I paced the floor, taking shallow, rapid breaths. My heart was racing. I knew my name would be called soon, around 10 a.m. I had urinated at least four times in the past hour and was feeling the need to go again.

What if something goes wrong?
I had seen it happen before with other men who were scheduled to be released. Sometimes their ride never showed up. Sometimes their release was delayed. I had seen it all before.

My anxious thoughts slowed when I heard the golden words: “Pernice, to the rotunda.” I took a deep breath, the kind you hold for a few seconds as you process something momentous. Then I grabbed my clear, plastic bag that contained my well-worn orange shower shoes, toothbrush, toothpaste and deodorant, and headed for the rotunda.

This was goodbye to prison. I was off to the unknown. A society I had been hidden from for 13 years.

THE FIRST STEPS
As I approached the main building, I felt as if I was in slow motion. I looked into the eyes of every person I passed. I wasn’t sure whether to smile or remain stoic. Some people weren’t leaving for decades; I did not want to make them feel envious or sad.

My First Days in Society

PJP is excited to announce its newest resource: a first-of-its-kind handbook, “A Prison Writer’s Guide to Media Writing,” designed to provide writers of all levels with initial training in journalism practices.
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 legal system or affected by the experience of prison or jail.

WHAT: Submissions under 2,000 words. No more than ONE STORY per submission per month. Please submit only your best work.

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 We do not publish academic research papers, religious sermons or work not intended for a general audience.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 delete portions of your work that don’t conform to this policy.

Submissions should include following:

- A header with your full name, prison ID, contact information, date, word count and suggested headline. Your D.F. is only used for verification and to send you information.
- A two- to three-sentence bio to publish with your piece including your state. If you are already published, we are welcome to mention other work. (If you do not submit a bio, we will create a simple one that says where you are incarcerated.)
- If you prefer a first name or pen name as your byline, include a request with a reason that can be published as part of your bio (e.g., fear of retribution, already established as a writer under the pen name.)
- A photo to go with your bio. If that’s not possible, we will use a graphic of your initials.

WHEN: We accept stories on a rolling basis. You will receive a copy of your story if we publish it on PJP. We have a large backlog of submissions, but we consider each one carefully. Please allow 18 weeks. (Timely stories will be expedited.)

As of October 2023, the PJP team has long-term growth on our minds.

Y ou’ll see that reflected in the material selected for this issue, including a cover story on returning to the free world, a Q&A with a formerly incarcerated journalist who is figuring out how to build a freelance career outside the walls, and our announcement about the upcoming publication of our handbook.

The 200-plus page handbook will include a certificate program designed to provide writers at all stages with an introduction to different kinds of journalistic writing. We know you’ve been waiting for something like this, and we hope it will be a resource you can turn to again and again as you develop as a writer.

We want you to know that we are doing everything we can to build a healthy organization, capable of supporting your journalism work now and into the future. That’s why we were thrilled to have PJP recognized this year by Local Independent Online News Publishers, an organization that supports independent news entrepreneurs as they build sustainable businesses. PJP co-won a 2023 LION Operational Resilience Award.

Speaking of awards, we want to congratulate the winners of PEN America’s 2023 Prison Writing Contest (see page 3), with a special shout-out to writers whose work has appeared in this newspaper: Andrew Suh (Vol. 3, Issue 1), Marina Bueno (Vol. 3, Issue 2) and David Babb (Vol. 3, Issue 4). Check out our back issues to read samples of their excellent work.

We know the holiday season can be difficult, being away from your family and friends. Please know that you are in our thoughts, and we appreciate you being a part of our community of writers and journalists who are working to shift the narrative and bring about change from the inside.

We’re proud of all of your efforts and look forward to reading your next submissions.

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.

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 artworks per entry. Artwork cannot be returned.

Click here to view the full submission guidelines.

The Prison Journalism Project is an independent, nonprofit, national initiative. We work with incarcerated writers and those impacted by incarceration to train them in the tools of journalism and help them reach a wide audience through our publication as well as through collaborations with mainstream media. We believe that the deep reforms that are necessary to fix the U.S. criminal legal system can only happen by shifting the narrative. Intentional, responsible and well-crafted journalism from within our incarcerated community can break stereotypes, increase transparency and drive change.

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To promote a writing program (content, submissions call, etc.), in a future PJP Inside edition, contact PJP at inquiries@prisonjournalismproject.org

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and I scanned the parking lot before I got out. I was later learned that those were electric cars. As the cars so many vibrant color schemes. Everything in prison overload. Buildings had changed. The flashy colors of doors. I looked over at the officer escorting me for permission. As I entered the double steel doors for the last time, I was happy, afraid, anxious and excited. I didn’t know whether to look or smile. But I kept my emotions in check. I was still in a medium security prison after all.

I entered the strip-out room next. Why did I need to get naked in front of a corrections officer and a security camera before leaving? I will never know. As I stripped off my prison gray uniform, the officer happily handed me my dress-out clothing. The blue jeans were nice and soft, and felt almost like putting my feet into a cloud. The new clothing made me feel totally different and strange — but it was a momentous experience. I entered the strip-out room next. As I stripped off my prison gray uniform, the officer happily handed me my dress-out clothing. The blue jeans were nice and soft, and felt almost like putting my feet into a cloud. The new clothing made me feel totally different and strange — but it was a momentous experience.

I was with two older prisoners who would not have been able to fend off a threat. So much was going through my mind, it was tough to sort things out. I slid into the booth, and the waitress approached. She was nice to me. She asked how I was doing and what I wanted to drink. It was much different than what I had been accustomed to. I stumbled over my words as I ordered orange juice, which I hadn’t had in many years because I didn’t know whether to look or smile. But I kept my emotions in check. I was still in a medium security prison after all.

In the store, people had passed me by without a second thought. As soon as we hit the road, I was hit with sensory overload. Buildings had changed. The flashy colors of doors. I looked over at the officer escorting me for permission: administration. As I entered the double steel doors for the last time, I was happy, afraid, anxious and excited. I didn’t know whether to look or smile. But I kept my emotions in check. I was still in a medium security prison after all.

I turned in my keys at the last window on the secure side of the gray metal bars. “Good luck,” the corrections officer told me. At that moment I did not need luck. I needed to focus on the years passing in my mind. I was overwhelmed. I was happy, afraid, anxious and excited. I didn’t know whether to look or smile. But I kept my emotions in check. I was still in a medium security prison after all.

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LEARN

× PRISON JOURNALISM PROJECT

Can I Quote You on That?

5 tips for interviewing people in prison.

1. Be as transparent as you can about your intentions. Tell your source upfront that you’d like to interview them for a specific story and tell them where you hope the piece will be published. If your source is uncomfortable providing their name when safety is an issue, you may want to look for another source.

2. Keep your pen and notebook visible so they can see you are taking notes on what they say. It’s standard practice in reported stories to use first and last names. If they are reluctant to give you these, make sure they have a journalistically acceptable reason for anonymity. Usually this has to do with safety. When safety is a concern, it is possible to use their first name and the initial of their last name, or a description of them without a name. If your source is uncomfortable providing their name when safety is not an issue, you may want to look for another source.

3. Keep your source up-to-date on what you have taken down. Double-check with them to make sure that it’s still OK to use that information as a quote or attributed to them. It’s standard practice in reported stories to get permission and send it in with your story so the editor knows. Let them know that an editor may also want to verify the information once the piece has been submitted.

4. Keep the name and profession visible so they can see you are taking notes on what they say. It’s standard practice in reported stories to use first and last names. If they are reluctant to give you these, make sure they have a journalistically acceptable reason for anonymity. Usually this has to do with safety. When safety is a concern, it is possible to use their first name and the initial of their last name, or a description of them without a name. If your source is uncomfortable providing their name when safety is not an issue, you may want to look for another source.

5. Keep your source up-to-date on what you have taken down. When you’re preparing a story, especially one that involves multiple interviews, it’s good to go back over the notes and ask questions to make sure you have all the facts. Double-check with them to make sure that it’s still OK to use that information as a quote or attributed to them. It’s standard practice in reported stories to get permission and send it in with your story so the editor knows. Let them know that an editor may also want to verify the information once the piece has been submitted.

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THE ETHICS OF PERMISSION

As an insider reporter, one of your biggest advantages is your ability to interview people that journalists on the outside can’t reach. In order to write a successful article while keeping yourself and your sources safe, there are some important professional ground rules to follow:

TIP 1: GET PERMISSION TO USE THE STORY.

Fifteen years later, I was writing for a prison newspaper, The Corcoran Sun, at Mule Creek State Prison. A couple times, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation secretary showed up to visit inmates in the system and the high costs of taking care of them that we focused on health care needs for the sick and elderly during the pandemic.

TIP 2: ALWAYS BE ALERT FOR A GOOD STORY.

Keep plenty of paper and pens with you. Get your subject talking about something they’re really interested in (themselves). Always take and keep notes.

A few years after the Spector story, I started another newspaper, The Mule Creek Post, at Mule Creek State Prison. A couple times, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation secretary showed up in the newspaper.

In that scenario, you’ve got may be 10 seconds to approach them and get them talking before they move the tour along. You need a catchy opener and a good follow-up question.

On one of those occasions, Ralph D Socialist, the secretary at that time, was accompanied by Jon S. Tigar, a U.S. District Court judge for Northern California. Tigar was part of the federal three-judge panel that, in 2009, imposed a state prison population cap to combat overcrowding. I asked Secretary D Socialist how the current CDCR population status. He pulled out his cellphone and began reciting numbers. Even better, he explained how the panel was enforcing their ruling.

TIP 3: ALWAYS BE READY, EVEN WHEN YOU’RE NOT.

Look for your opening. Get them laughing. When Kathleen Allison, another former CDCR secretary, showed up, the circumstances were very different. Allison didn’t do interviews. But she liked to talk.

She had taken over as CDCR secretary during the COVID-19 pandemic, after beginning her career with the corrections department as a medical technical assistant.

I saw my opening when she pointed out that CDCR had intentionally focused on health care needs for the sick and elderly during the pandemic. She had started out by saying, “I think you can relate to this,” alluding to the fact that I’m a prisoner of advanced age.

I followed with, “Don’t you think that given the amount of elderly inmates in the system and the high costs of taking care of them that we could find an easy way to alleviate some of these issues?”

She responded, “You mean, let them out?”

And I shot back, “May I quote you on that?”

The exchange elicited a round of laughs. Suddenly, Allison was the funniest, most delightful person in the room. She was also answering questions. Twenty minutes later, as she was leaving, she leaned in and whispered to me, “You know, I never do interviews.”

TIP 4: BE PREPARED TO BE SURPRISED.

Keep an open mind about what the story might become. The most personally impactful interview I ever did came as a complete surprise. The newspaper was working on a story about childhood abuse and trauma, and we had come across information that there is significant overlap between those in prison and foster care. This implied that many incarcerated people had experienced abuse, neglect or abandonment.

I surveyed 100 prisoners, asking three questions: “Were you a victim of childhood abuse and trauma?” “How did it impact your criminality and imprisonment?” “Would you like to talk about it?”

The first person I interviewed was a 60-something building porter. He was cleaning the shower and agreed to an interview. I asked him the first question, to which he replied, “No, I never was abused or anything like that.”

Then he quit scrubbing the shower, stood up and thought for a few seconds before adding, “Well, my mother did try to kill me when I was a baby.”

He stared into the distance. There were tears in his eyes. It felt like this was the first time he’d ever really thought about it, or maybe the first time anybody had asked. He then returned to cleaning the shower. “I don’t think that had anything to do with nothing though,” he added.

“Could you talk about that?”

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TIP 5: RESPECT YOUR SOURCE.

Give the person you are interviewing respect, dignity and care. What they share with you might just change the way you look at reporting — and your life.
**Anatomy of an Obituary**

An obituary is an article that announces a person's death and also honors a person's life. Obituaries achieve this in a few key ways. They offer important biographical facts. They describe the context in which the person lived. And they explain the impact that person had on the world around them, usually through quotes from the people who knew them best. Obituaries are not complete biographies of a person's life from birth to death. They are not a resume of accomplishments. They are the highlights of a life lived and the memories of those who knew them.

Many people die behind the walls every year, some of whom have lost their connection to family and friends on the outside. By writing an obituary for PJP, you can acknowledge in a public way that the lives of people often invisible to society are worthy of remembrance too.

I like any work of journalism, obituaries require that you start with reporting before you begin writing. It's important to interview colleagues, classmates, friends, family and others who knew the person well. Then, when writing, weave in anecdotes and specific moments from the person's life to show what kind of person they were. Strive to be authentic by including the totality of who they were, not just their positive traits.

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**David Inocencio Championed Writing By Incarcerated Youth**

**Inocencio died in July after three decades of publishing work from inside California juvenile halls and beyond.**

By NELL BERNSTEIN

Inocencio was different, Morse said. “Dave always had time.”

An immigrant from China who dropped out of school in seventh grade, Wool’s English was limited, and the first piece he wrote was two sentences long. But seeing his words in print along with a note of encouragement from the facilitators “was a very proud day,” Wool said.

Wool was transferred to the youth prison system formerly known as the California Youth Authority, where he continued to mail Inocencio throughout his four-year stay. The day he was released, he borrowed a cell phone and called Inocencio from the gate.

When Wool showed up the next day at the Pacific News Service office on Market Street, people he had never met greeted him by his name. He found it unsettling, until he realized they knew him through his writing.

“That was a great feeling,” he said.

Wool, recently a senior manager at a Bay Area-based freight company, led workshops in the years after his release and now plans to volunteer again.

“It’s really important to allow someone to relieve their inner feelings,” he said, “and show the world that they are not this person their record labels them as.”

Managing editor Simone Zapata, who started working as a volunteer in 2012, has been overwhelmed by the outpouring of love and appreciation that followed news of Inocencio’s passing.

“It’s a real testament to how far and how deep The Beat has spread into people’s lives throughout the years,” she said. The relationships built during the weekly workshops are “transformational not only for the young people but also for our volunteers,” Zapata said. “You’re accessing a depth with these young people that you wouldn’t otherwise if you were not engaging with their writing on a weekly basis.”

The tribute issue is filled with evidence of this transformation. In poems, letters and short essays, workshop participants past and present describe the power of both the magazine and the man who founded it.

“Despite the oftentimes awful crimes we committed, The Beat Within helped nurture the notion that we still had a place at the table. We were still lovable,” wrote a longtime contributor who signed his name as Kevin. “Your life’s work, your passion for seeing the lost and wandering, saved lives.”

Nearby years, young people in juvenile halls around the San Francisco Bay Area waited amiably twice each month for David Inocencio to show up on their units with copies of The Beat Within.

They were eager to see their bylines — printed in 7.5-point font to fit as much text as possible into the magazine’s 72 pages — and to read each other’s writing. A typical edition of the bimonthly publication written and illustrated by incarcerated youth brims with ambition, grief, hope, remorse and longing for life outside jail walls.

The latest edition is an unusual one. It pays tribute to the remarkable legacy of the magazine’s founder. Inocencio, who died on July 8 of an aggressive brain cancer, was 59. Friends and family, as well as the countess young people he worked with over his 27 years as editor of The Beat Within, are mourning his death.

Launched in 1996 as a newsletter written from San Francisco’s Youth Guidance Center, the Beat Within now reaches across the state and country. Thousands of detained youth attend writing workshops each year in a dozen California counties, as well as adults housed at San Quentin State Prison and the Central California Women’s Facility in Chowchilla, Outside California, the Beat Within circulates among contributors in Louisiana, Montana and New Mexico. The organization also offers workshops to youth in foster care, homeless shelters and alternative schools.

A longtime San Franciscan who grew up in Daly City, Inocencio began his career as a counselor at the San Francisco Juvenile Probation Department, and later directed the diversion program at the non-profit Community and Criminal Justice. Inocencio launched what contributors refer to as “The Beat,” when he was working at Pacific News Service as the education director for its Youth Outlook news magazine. In 2013, The Beat Within became an independent organization.

“We are pressing on,” said Lisa Lavasseur, Inocencio’s wife and colleague at The Beat Within, where she is now executive director. “It’s a great comfort to get back to work. I know that this is what David would want us to do.”

**Mourning a mentor and friend**

The depth of Inocencio’s commitment comes up frequently among those who knew him. Many described years of correspondence while they were locked up in youth or adult prisons, and well after their release. Still others credit Inocencio with giving them their first jobs on the outside.

Russell Morse, 42, a writer and justice advocate with a master’s of fine arts in creative nonfiction from New York University, met Inocencio in 1997 when Morse was a “sad, lonely, angry” kid on B1 — the unit for the youngest kids at San Francisco’s juvenile hall.

The first time Morse attended a Beat Within workshop, his main goal was to get out of his cell for an hour. Inocencio spotted the new kid, walked over, and struck what Morse called “the classic Beat Within pose: You don’t pull up a chair, you just squat down next to the desk.”

Inocencio had “a journalistic gift for keeping people talking,” Morse said. “I went to him because I had all the time in the world — doing time — and much time you have left — and the sad thing is that the longer you’re there, the less time people on the outside have for you.”

Inocencio was different, Morse said. “They always had time.”

Mervyn Wool, 40, met Inocencio inside the Youth Guidance

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Obituaries include quotes from people who know the deceased. But at the very least, an obituary should acknowledge the people who survive the person who has died.

Notice how each person Bernstein quotes sheds light on Inocencio in a different way. Russell Morse talks about Inocencio’s gift to get people to open up and make time for them. Mervyn Wool talks about how Inocencio created space for people to get to know him beyond his crime through his writing. As managing editor, Simone Zapata talks about the impact of The Beat Within.

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In this section, the writer relates anecdotes from people who know Inocencio to illuminate the kind of person he was. The best anecdotes are specific, avoid platitudes and help us visualize the particular character of the person.

Notice how the writer describes how Inocencio stood out — what was different about him from others. She doesn’t talk about characteristics or aspects about him that are common. Even if you want to talk about how kind someone was, strive to find how that person’s kindness was special.
Ryan Moser in conversation with PJP.

Ryan Moser always knew he wanted to be a writer.

During his time inside, Moser worked as a staff writer for The Endeavor, the prison newspaper at Everglades Correctional Institution, Florida. He landed pieces in the Miami Herald, Miami New Times, The Marshall Project, Truthout and PEN America, among others. His first article for PJP appeared on the website on May 17, 2021. He quickly became one of PJP’s first correspondents, writing 13 stories for PJP before his release in December 2022.

Since then, Moser has continued to be successful as a freelancer for publications like Metro Philadelphia, Slate, The Progressive, The Appeal and Next City. In addition to continuing to write for PJP, he is a reporting fellow at two organizations: Resolve Philly, an alternative journalism organization based in Philadelphia, and the Education Writers Association.

Moser is the first PJP-affiliated writer to start a journalism career on the outside. We caught up with him to hear more about his experience. Our conversation was edited for length and clarity.

Q: What do you do as a reporting fellow?

At Resolve Philly, I evaluate reentry services for returning citizens in Philadelphia. My project for the Education Writers Association is to write about the college prison program at Everglades Correctional Institution in Florida. The Resolve Philly fellowship is one-year. The EWA fellowship is four months for one project.

Q: How did you find out about these fellowships?

I contacted Resolve Philly when I first got home. I actually applied for a job and did not get it. Then they recommended that I apply for this inaugural fellowship. I’m very involved with the EWA as an organization but I did not know about the fellowship; a formerly incarcerated writer, a friend of mine, suggested I apply for it.

Q: That sounds like a lot of balls in the air.

The Resolve Philly fellowship is 20 hours a week. And EWA is a project that I have four months to finish however I choose. That doesn’t include my full-time job [as a project manager for a turf management company], or all my freelance work.

Q: How do you keep it all organized?

I depend heavily on time management [and] do everything in blocks of time. For example, today I’ll work nine hours at my day job. And then I’ll go home and spend two hours working for my Resolve Philly fellowship. Then I will spend four to six hours writing as a freelancer, because I always have an ongoing article.

On the weekends, I have time blocked out for my fellowship work, two hours on Saturday and Sunday. If I have time on Sunday evenings, I do some freelance pitching so that I always have work coming. And I make sure that I have time to read, exercise, meditate or go-hiking. Because I work 80 hours a week, I need to pull the release valve once in a while to make sure that I’m taking care of myself.

Q: That’s a lot.

I have a lot of time to make up for. I’m 46, entering a new career with no education or experience. So I’ve got to work harder than anybody else. Because I have another skilled trade I could be doing as a career, I gave myself a year to find a job based on this work. My goal is to use these fellowships, the freelance work and the connections I’m making as a stepping stone to a full-time job in journalism, whether it be a staff writer at a [legally] newsroom or an online news agency.

Q: Tell us about the kinds of stories you like to write.

I love solutions journalism. The genre’s ethos allows me to follow my positive outlook on life—to try to solve problems instead of just critiquing issues in the world. I love writing about the environment, mental health and addiction — pieces that have a higher purpose that will help lead change.

Q: What’s been your favorite assignment so far?

As a freelancer, I pitch a lot of concerts and art shows. Events that I can go cover. This summer I wrote about a company called Reverb, a green music-touring company. Basically, what they do is they follow bands and make their tours sustainable, everything from the food waste to the lighting to parking lots real. For the story, I met Reverb at a concert and met the Dave Matthews Band. That was really fun to do.

Q: How long did the reporting take?

I put in probably 20 hours on the story. And I got paid $125. Larger publications like Huffington Post or Slate pay around $500 per story. I think that’s something that should change, because you should get paid for what you do.

Q: How about your most challenging assignment?

The most challenging was probably one I just did for Reasons to Be Cheerful magazine. It was about virtual reality job-training in prison. This tech startup, Transfr, has a career education technology software that lets you put VR goggles on and change the oil in a car or learn how to work construction. It was difficult because it was very technical. I had to learn everything that I could about the company in order to write a thorough article. I did a lot of research and multiple follow-up interviews with the company CEO and the prison. I probably put 30 hours into this article.

Q: How long is the story?

Two thousand words — that’s about as long as most online magazines want you to go. I do like longform journalism. But I haven’t had the opportunity to do much because you can’t spend weeks working on it when you’re not getting paid [in advance, ever much].

That’s why I joined the [freelancers’ union] Freelance Solidarity Project and the Society of Professional Journalists. There needs to be some standard set for this industry. This is a profession that should be held in some esteem and compensated accordingly. But freelance journalists make almost no money. A lot of my mentors have been freelancers and they told me if you don’t have several anchor gigs, you’re just not going to be able to earn a living. [Editor’s note: An anchor gig is a sustained relationship with one publication in which you write stories for them on a regular basis.]

Q: How did you find your mentors?

Most of them I got to know by writing and doing journalism inside prison. They contacted me or they were referred to me by somebody else I knew. Without my network, I wouldn’t have taken a chance at this as a career right now. I wouldn’t have been able to do it on my own.

Q: What advice would you give readers who are interested in trying something similar when they get out?

I’d say find a mentor in the business that can help you. Be willing to take criticism and be teachable, because when you work with editors, you want to form a long-lasting, sustainable relationship. Sharpen up your soft skills. A lot of times inside, we lose that — things like being reliable, professional, and working well with others, meeting deadlines, not complaining when you have to do revisions.

The biggest thing is: Don’t give up. Because, like anything else in life that’s worthwhile, it’s not easy. I’ve almost given up several times since I’ve been home, but I pushed through. And I think in the end, it’s going to pay off.

Q: How did you do that?

I had some bad days recently, a lot of rejection. And I was just like, I can’t do this anymore. Then I asked myself, well, why are you doing this? I’m not doing it for the money or prestige. I’m writing because it matters. I can use my skill to make some small change in the world.

Q: At what point did you know that this was something you wanted to pursue?

I’ve always wanted to be a writer, but I decided to pursue journalism after doing it inside prison. I found a love of reporting. Talking to people and hearing those stories, doing the research, and then taking all those ingredients and mixing them into this final article that I was proud of. PJP had a huge part of that, because they trained me as I was getting started. And so I could reach out and ask questions.

Q: Is there anything else you’d like to add?

If you’re trying to be a journalist when you get out, it’s important to spend your free time inside working on your craft. And work hard. Because it doesn’t matter what connections you have, you have to be a good writer. It’s a competitive industry.
She Was in Constant Pain. They Told Her It Was Normal.

Before she could fight cancer, Grandma had to fight for her diagnosis.

BY ARNOLDO JUAREZ  |  Arnoldo Juarez writes from Correctional Training Facility, California.

“One! You were not sentenced to death,” I said in an attempt to console a fellow incarcerated woman crying hysterically inside a bathroom at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women.

As a detail worker in the south hall housing unit, it was my job to clean the bathroom. I often wound up chatting with the women living there as I cleaned.

“It’s all my fault, Cresh,” she said, looking up at me through tear-filled, hazel eyes.

“I thought I had a full hysterectomy years ago; now I found out I had a partial hysterectomy; I still have ovaries. I didn’t even know,” she blurted out and began to sob even harder.

Loretta Burroughs is better known to us in Edna Mahan as Grandma. Grandma got her nickname not just because of her age, but also for the love and hugs she bestows upon other incarcerated people here. We cherish her.

That day in the bathroom, Grandma had just been diagnosed with stage 4 cervical cancer, and she was devastated. In the years we both have been incarcerated, we have watched our friends and families — inside and out — die from cancer. I’ve lost my sister and aunt.

Grandma lost her mother. I’ve watched three women in the wing of the south hall, where I am housed, die from it too.

Grandma’s type of cancer was adenocarcinoma, which is commonly caused by smoking and exposure to toxins. Grandma had never been a smoker. We can’t know for sure the cause of her cancer, but other prisons on toxic sites have been linked to a rash of illnesses. A 2014 investigation at State Correctional Institution Fayette, which was built on top of a coal mine in western Pennsylvania, found incarcerated individuals there had “alarming” rates of health problems, including cancer.

The harder Grandma sobbed, the angrier I became. I was angry at Grandma’s diagnosis. I was angry at the cancer and the sneaky intrusiveness of this ugly disease. I was angry at Grandma’s diagnosis. I was angry at the design of this facility and others that were built on contaminated sites.

According to data gathered by a journalist for Grist in 2015, over half of New Jersey’s prisons are located on toxic sites. Edna Mahan is one of them, and it’s within half a mile of another toxic site.

I have been at this facility since 2000. Not long after, I started noticing issues with the water system. Sometimes the water is green, and sometimes it has a muddy tint and a rotten smell. The majority of women I have talked to have noticed dark spots appear on their backs, which we think is from showering in contaminated water.

Shortly after the Grist article was published, I saw a lot of corrections officers carrying gallons of bottled water around — I realized they were avoiding the water in here. The incarcerated women have started buying bottled water from the commissary now too, but we can’t buy enough to avoid the water entirely. We still have to shower, cook and brush our teeth with it.

I was angry, too, at the medical department for what I perceived to be their negligence. Early detection is so important in treating cancer, but it’s hard in prison when we have little control over our medical choices and have to advocate hard for our health.

The first time I saw Grandma in the bathroom in excruciating pain, I asked her what was wrong. She told me about the heavy bleeding and severe stomach pain she’d had on and off. She said she had seen the facility doctor, but wasn’t given a Pap smear and was told her symptoms were nothing abnormal. Grandma says she went to the medical clinic half a dozen times with the same symptoms for over a year, every time she was told nothing was wrong and was prescribed ibuprofen.

Finally tired of being dismissed and plagiarized with the constant feeling that something was not right, Grandma called home in May 2022. She asked her family to call the facility regarding her medical treatment. Just a few hours after the call, Grandma was called for a medical examination and given a Pap smear. The Pap smear displayed a polyp, which looked suspicious and was removed for testing. The nurse told Grandma she would have the results in two to three days.

On one call, the doctor read her results from the computer screen, saying, “You have stage 4 cervical cancer. I’m so sorry I didn’t catch this earlier.”

A few weeks later, Grandma was transported to a university hospital for the first of many trips for testing and treatment.

Stage 4 cervical cancer is an aggressive cancer which quickly metastasizes. Thankfully, the cancer did not spread into Grandma’s colon, and doctors were able to remove it by performing a full hysterectomy, the same procedure Grandma thought she had had years ago.

Two months after that devastating day in the office’s bathroom, a smiling Grandma came to update me on her journey toward beating cancer.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“I have good days and bad days, Cresh. Today is a good day. I feel like I am healing.”

Loretta Burroughs “Grandma”
In the Depths of Death Row, a Light

"I FIND IT SOMEWHAT IRONIC THAT A PERSON CAN LEARN TO LIVE LIFE IN A PLACE WHERE THEY WERE SENT TO DIE." 

Photo by BrilliantEye on iStock

POETRY VERSE FROM BEHIND THE WALL

HOLLOW

BY LAMARR LITTLE | Lamarr Little writes from Eastern New York Correctional Facility, New York.

Prison nights are silent and full of emptiness. Some nights I stay up late to read while cries of those condemned can be overhead. Inaudible whispers echoing off the walls. Sadness envelopes me like a state blanket covered in lint, or shade, or rain. Yeah, rain — that’s more than moist, because it feels as if it’s soaked in an abyss of steel, wondering if my voice will echo.

I can’t hear myself, but I continue to listen, anticipating, expecting.

Nothing yet.

I turn a page, but the book feels heavy; the words are moving. My eyes attempt, unsuccessfully, to hold them still.

Objects lacking in form.

A toilet flushes, dragging my dreams away, washing out to a faraway place. Somewhere I’ve never been and will never see. Somewhere, perhaps, filled with hope.

Unlike this hollow cell.

In my barracks there are tables for games — Benches for leisure activity and a whole lot of blame.

From the Prison Journalism Project

IN A PLACE WHERE THEY WERE SENT TO DIE

As they report on their daily life and surroundings, these two poets craft subtle escapes with their language. The "abyss of steel" can’t stop Little’s thoughts from traveling to a hopeful, faraway place. Tyson makes a mural’s flat images feel real, and prison thoughts from traveling to a hopeful, faraway place. Tyson makes a mural’s flat images feel real, and prison

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