Stateville Speaks cartoonist Arkee Chaney was serving life without parole. Then he was released in June. This is his story.

By Arkee Chaney

I was born in Shelby, Mississippi on January 10, 1944. When I was very young, my family moved to Memphis, Tennessee. My father was a preacher, but he was just like the Temptations song, “Father was a Rolling Stone.” Pop had a whole bunch of females. So, my mother left him. He stayed in Tennessee and the rest of us moved to Chicago. We lived with my auntie for a while before moving to the Altgeld Gardens projects on the north side of Chicago.

I started drawing when I was seven by tracing pictures. After a while, I didn’t need to trace anymore. I could just draw anything I wanted. Art class was the only thing I liked about school. I would draw turkeys, pumpkins, and other stuff on the blackboard in the hallway at school.

My father’s name was Mabel. I was his first son, so he named me Mabel. I didn’t like going to school because of that. My mother would walk me into school, sit me down at my desk and tell the teacher to keep an eye on me. Other kids at school would make fun of my name and say “Mabel, Mabel, set the table, don’t forget the red-hot peas” – and the fight was on! Or, I would just leave during recess and never come back.

The first time I stole something, I was eight years old. I saw an older dude I knew put an apple in his pocket at a store. He called me over and handed me an apple. I stuck it under my shirt, and we walked out. And when I ate that apple, it was the sweetest apple I had ever tasted because I took a chance on doing something.

I stayed out of school because everyone called me “Mabel” and in recess we would fight. So, I got with some other dudes – some young crooks – and we started hanging out, going downtown, sneaking into movies, doing anything we could think of doing. I used to get into all kinds of trouble. If it was trouble, I was in it because everyone in my posse was a crook. So, I was a crook too. And we’d get busted sometimes.

I spent time in juvenile detention centers. I remember when I first got to Parental Juvenile Home, I cried myself to sleep under the covers. I didn’t want anyone to see I was crying because they’d consider me weak. Then, I got used to being there. Before that, I was at Audy Home, then Parental, then St. Charles Juvenile Home, then house arrest then county jail.

One time, a dude kept calling me “Arkee.” I asked him why he called me that, and he told me that Arkee means “my brother” in Arabic. So, when I was 18 I changed my name to Arkee. The government doesn’t want to acknowledge that as my name because I wasn’t born with it, but I felt like I was in control of myself when I named myself Arkee.

That’s who I am. That’s been my name since I was 18.

A few years later, I enlisted in the Army and served for about eight months before I ended up in See ARKEE, page 4
Every Illinois prisoner should be eligible to earn meritorious parole because there’s no benefit to the prison system nor to public safety for denying prisoners an incentive to earn their release. In fact, being that virtually every prisoner in Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) will one day be released, IDOC is essentially endangering the public by not offering a system of all-inclusive meritorious parole.

In the absence of an incentive for prisoners to participate in rehabilitative programs, they aren’t left with a reason to undertake the arduous task of swimming against the tide of the current prison culture of violence and regression. In conjunction with the corrosive psychological, emotional and physical aspects of incarceration, serving a protracted sentence of 15, 20 or 30 years further relegates prisoners beyond the realm of self-sufficiency to the extent that upon release – most at 50, 60, even 70 years of age—they essentially move from one form of an all-encompassing tax burdening social program, prison, to another, public aid. Therefore, in most cases, without the incentive of meritorious parole, and the behavioral modification and life skills that will be taught therein, many prisoners will leave prison no better off, and in some cases worse, than when they entered.

As oxymoronic as it may sound, especially being that the public has been indoctrinated by decades of tough on crime rhetoric, longer, harsher sentences actually don’t reform prisoners, nor do such lengthy sentences make the public safer. There are numerous independent studies that reveal that the benefits that can be reaped from incarceration begins to wane, and in fact becomes detrimental to the inmate’s rehabilitation process, when they serve more than 10 consecutive years in prison. Being that independent scientific research has revealed that there’s no benefit to public safety nor to prisoners for keeping them incarcerated longer than 10 years, we must ask ourselves why do we, as a society, continue to do it. A debt to society?

Contrary to popular belief, although many of us are being warehoused in dilapidated 6 x 9 cells, and as horrible as the confines and accommodations are – leaky toilets, moldy showers, unsavory food – other than just withering away, we aren’t paying a debt to society. Instead, we’re continuing to incur debt – financially and the form of human capital – that we as a society can’t afford. Thirty years ago, Illinois spent 52 million annually on prisons, today it spends 1.4 billion. The increase in prison spending has a direct correlation to the increased length of, what we now know to be ineffective, prison sentences which have led to an inflated prison population. The human capital comes in the form of the 2.7 million children (under the age of 18) who have an incarcerated parent.<sup>2</sup> Twenty-three percent of those children have been expelled or suspended from school<sup>3</sup> and have an increased risk of juvenile delinquency<sup>4</sup>. Delinquency, as is well known, is a strong indicator as to who will contribute to the future influx of prisoners.

A system of all-inclusive meritorious parole will incentivize prisoners to comply with prison rules, which in turn will create a less violent and disruptive prison culture. As a result, the new prison culture will be conducive to the aim of rehabilitation. In the midst of that new culture, many prisoners could begin to truly repay their debt to society by earning meritorious parole while they are still relatively healthy and able bodied enough to become members of the work force. Being members of the work force will enable them to establish relatively stable lives and become an active presence in their children’s lives; an act that will help stem the flow in the school-to-prison pipeline.

All-inclusive meritorious parole – by requiring that prisoners enlist in behavioral modification and life skills courses – will reduce the prison population and improve public safety. Therefore, if the purpose of prison is to modify deviant behavior and improve public safety, all-inclusive meritorious parole is the means by which Illinois arrives at its desired goals.

References
1 - Illinois State Commission on Criminal Justice and Sentencing Reform, Final Report (part 1 & 2) December 2016 p.8

The Fight of our Life
By Marvin Alexis

We, my people, are in for the fight of our lives! But I promise you, we will beat this! We will survive.

This faceless enemy eludes our radars, he is undetectable to our senses; We can’t hear him, can’t smell him, can’t see him, can’t feel him… Yet, we can catch him.

No doubt, defeating this adversary may seem like a feat too impossible. But, as devastating as things may seem, it is all merely optics – overcoming this villain is nothing more than another obstacle.

See, this nation was founded on conquering the improbable; When tyrants impeded our freedom, we started a revolution; and, When cowards knocked down our towers, it was our courage, our sacrifice and resolution that got us through it.

Whether it was mass shootings, natural disasters that ravaged our communities, or radical dissident militants who threatened the evolution of our peace and unity, we, as a people, prevailed.

So yes, this faceless enemy may elude our radars, and may be undetectable to our senses; We can’t hear him, can’t smell him, can’t see him, can’t feel him, even though we can catch him.

However, this fact I do know, and must implore… If we can catch COVID-19, then, we can destroy it.

Much love and respect goes out to the frontline responders, and everyone who’s joining in the fight to defeat this pandemic. WE WILL BEAT THIS!!!

Submissions Wanted
Stateville Speaks wants to publish your article, poem, essay or artwork. Try to limit articles to around 500 words. Articles may be edited for length. Due to the volume of submissions we receive, work will not be returned. See page 11 for address.
**FROM THE EDITOR**

Welcome to another edition of Stateville Speaks. First, and foremost, we wish you good health always, but especially throughout this continuing viral pandemic. While we may know more than we did in its initial onslaught, it is of utmost importance that the known proper protocols are continuing to be followed- the wash your hands (yes with soap and warm water), maintain social distancing, and wear a mask. At this point we are hearing mixed reviews, so please let us know how you are doing.

Sadly, amid COVID-19 and so much suffering, systemic racial inequities of health care continue as does the physical mistreatment, this time, with the whole world watching. Even more shocking is those that still deny the egregious, racist treatment and are unable to utter three succinct words-Black Lives Matter. Thank you all for the wonderful, heartfelt essays, in which we could print only a few. Good things are happening too. While everything is complicated with COVID-19, bills are being drafted and introduced, two most notable HB5256 & SB3233. We will keep you posted as they change and/or move through the system.

Some amazing programs are happening on the inside. One being the Dixon Correctional Center Theatre Workshop, in which they produced thematic events around Black History, an anthology of change of season, and were set to focus on Latin Heritage Month. Please let us know what you are planning during this viral hiatus for the future.

Slowly and consistently programs are also returning to Stateville C.C. Kudos to the graduates- an accomplishment that nobody can take away congratulations (Can we hear more?). And kudos to those that worked so hard putting these programs together, persisting through adversity, and continue the work.

Two books that need mentioning, The Forgotten Tales of El Capitan by Alex Negron and Rope of Hope by Anthony Gay. Remember that the holidays are around the corner-what a great gift to give and of support.

Finally, what can we say about our beloved artist and political ‘toonist? He is out after serving 33 years through the tenacious work of the Illinois Prison Project. Listening to his life story, falling through the cracks in school, bullying, raised by a single Mom, justifiably angry over racial mistreatment and lack of mentoring until well into his life sentence. How different could things have been? What have/are we doing to stop this repetitive outcome?

However, as I continue to listen to his life story it is apparent Arkee is looking forward. Acclimating to this fast, electronic filled, expensive world he has his art to keep him grounded. That and his dream of a studio and the desire to help mentor others, taking them up and along with him. Welcome home Arkee, may you have 33 years of artistic creativity on your own time. ■

**DISTANTLY CONNECTED**

By Corey Hodges

I glanced in the mirror today. Just to see another set of eyes, Hoping that I could see your reflection behind mine…

I placed my hand on my chest. Took the deepest breath, Just to make sure your heart is still strong and you’re still alive…

You are a special part of me, We are mathematically intertwined, Allow your thoughts to transcend; Then we can teleport through time…

So, let’s travel the world, Going wherever your mind takes “us”, As long as we are, “side-by-side”…

This is dedicated to my sisters in Logan. Especially, E.R. and L.M. Just because the mail never makes it on time, or people tend to forget to say they’re thinking of you… You’re never forgotten. (I promise) ■

**LEGISLATIVE UPDATES**

**SB3233 (EARNED DISCRETIONARY RELEASE)**

Amends the Unified Code of Corrections. Provides that notwithstanding the contrary to any provision of the Code, the Post-Conviction Hearing Article of the Code of Criminal Procedure of 1963, the Habeas Corpus Article of the Code of Civil Procedure, or the relief from judgments provisions of the Code of Civil Procedure, a person serving a term of imprisonment in a Department of Corrections institution or facility is eligible for Earned Discretionary Release and a parole hearing if he or she has served the greater of: (1) a term of imprisonment of at least 20 years; (2) 25% of his or her sentence; or (3) the minimum term of imprisonment for the most serious offense for which the person was convicted. Provides that a person serving a term of natural life imprisonment is eligible for Earned Discretionary Release and a parole hearing after serving a term of imprisonment of at least 20 years. Provides that each committed person eligible for Earned Discretionary Release on the effective date of the amendatory Act shall receive a risk assessment within one year after the effective date of the amendatory Act. Deletes provision that no person serving a term of natural life imprisonment may be paroled or released except through executive clemency. Contains a severability provision.

*While the Illinois General Assembly’s website, states the greater, our sources say it is to read the lesser, and that accordingly, a request for this correction has been submitted.

**HB5256 (ELDER)**

Amends the Unified Code of Corrections. Provides that a committed person who has attained the age of 60 years and served at least 20 consecutive years of imprisonment or a committed person who has served 30 consecutive years of imprisonment may submit a petition to the Prisoner Review Board seeking parole. Provides for the requirements of the petition. Provides that victims’ families shall be notified in a timely concern the petitioner’s application for parole under this provision in accordance with the Rights of Crime Victims and Witnesses Act, the Post-Conviction Hearing Article of the Code of Criminal Procedure of 1963, the Habeas Corpus Article of the Code of Civil Procedure, or the relief from judgments provisions of the Code of Civil Procedure, a person serving a term of imprisonment in a Department of Corrections institution or facility is eligible for Earned Discretionary Release and a parole hearing if he or she has served the greater of: (1) a term of imprisonment of at least 20 years; (2) 25% of his or her sentence; or (3) the minimum term of imprisonment for the most serious offense for which the person was convicted. Provides that a person serving a term of natural life imprisonment is eligible for Earned Discretionary Release and a parole hearing after serving a term of imprisonment of at least 20 years. Provides that each committed person eligible for Earned Discretionary Release on the effective date of the amendatory Act shall receive a risk assessment within one year after the effective date of the amendatory Act. Deletes provision that no person serving a term of natural life imprisonment may be paroled or released except through executive clemency. Contains a severability provision.

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These are both a “synopsis as introduced” of the bills. As they progress, they will often go through many changes and we will keep you apprised of any changes or progressions of these bills. ■

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the Georgia State Penitentiary. I just stayed in trouble. I was on leave, spending time in Augusta, Georgia. I bought a radio from a dude, but the radio was stolen, so I was arrested for buying stolen goods. The lawyer I was given, Joseph B. Dewitt – I’ll never forget his name – told me I should plead guilty to buying the stolen radio. I told him that I didn’t know it was stolen. I actually knew it was stolen, but I wasn’t going to tell him that. But he insisted, so I pleaded guilty. The judge turned his chair around, looked at the wall behind him, then spun back around and said “I don’t see how you got into the Army anyway. Ten years ought to straighten you out.” And he gave me 10 years prison for buying a stolen radio worth $20.

Back then, prisons in Georgia were segregated. Whites were on one side of the prison and blacks were on the other. Guards would shake down the black prisoners routinely, but not the white prisoners. I was on the boxing team in prison, and we didn’t mess with each other, but prisoners who were not on the team would come at me with a knife. I got stabbed three times. I thought they were going to kill me in prison because I was raising so much hell. I was really angry when I was locked up. I’d get into arguments with the warden and cuss him out.

About four or five years into my sentence, some young lawyers out of law school took my case and got my sentence commuted. It was about one in the morning when I was released from prison. I was loaded in a vehicle, took into a field with no houses or nothing; just a light shinning down from a single pole. Out in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night, in the segregated South, I thought I was going to be lynched. About a half an hour later, a Greyhound bus came, and I went to Atlanta. I was still really angry when I got out. I’d walk down the streets in Atlanta, and people would see me and cross to the other side. I was messed up in the head. I ended up back in Chicago and hooked up with a dame named Sandra. We lived together for about a year. I still had a lot of craziness in me. I just got into any kind of trouble that would come up.

I took up a trade as a welder and got a job making “burglar bars” to go over windows. I told my boss I had been in the penitentiary. He was cheating me and his other employees, so I quit. I ended up in prison in Illinois three times. The first two times were for stealing $35 and $80. Illinois had a “three strikes” law, and my third strike was in 1987 for a robbery. I was staying with my sister who had mental problems. She had a boyfriend named Billy. My sister was going to get evicted because she could not pay rent. She had two kids and we did not want her to get kicked out. So, we stuck up a cab driver and stole his money. Later that day, my sister confronted Billy because the money we gave her had blood on it. He told her what happened, and she reported us. The day the police arrested me was the same day my sister got evicted. I probably would have stuck up someone else, even if my sister wasn’t getting kicked out. That’s the type of mentality I had at the time. I acknowledge that because I know it ain’t gonna happen no more. I’m through with it.

I was given a life sentence without the possibility parole in 1987. Prisoners who are incarcerated before 1978 are eligible for parole. Even though my “first strike” was before 1978, I was not eligible for parole because my “third strike” was in 1987.

While in prison, I focused on my art. I started doing cartoons when I was in the Georgia State Penitentiary. I would do them for a newspaper for free. When I was in Stateville, a paper in Chicago was buying my cartoons for a while. Most of my ideas came from looking at the news. Some of my cartoons came from when someone would say something, and it made sense. If it was something I could use, I’d use it.

When I first got to Stateville, I thought I was in there for life. But after a while, I knew I would one day get out. Dudes used to see my work and tell me “Hey, Arkee, you keep doing that art, you’re going to get out of the joint.”

I’d spend my days in the art room making art. Three o’clock rolls around and I’d go back to my cell and continue doing artwork. They’d call chow, I’d go eat and still paint. I’d work sundown to sunup. The guards would often take my brushes, my paints and my paintings. One time, I called Bill Ryan about it, and the prison returned my paintings to Bill. Another time, a guard took one of my paintings and gave it to a female guard, who hung it in her office. I asked her for it back, but she wouldn’t give it to me. I told her I would go on a hunger
strike, but she was serious about not giving back my painting, so I didn’t. But any time they want to take something, they take it. The ones you really had to worry about was Orange Crush. They once took about 30 of my paintings. Godinez, who was the director at the time, walked by my cell and asked if I was still doing artwork. I told him about my paintings that were taken by Orange Crush. About 15 minutes later, I had my paintings back. Godinez used to give us credit when we did something good, and he was a pretty good dude anyway.

I met Dr. Margaret Burroughs1 when I was in Stateville. She created the DuSable Museum and the South Side Community Arts Center in Chicago, a place for African American artists to showcase their work. She was educated at the Art Institute of Chicago and was known for her time spent teaching in prison. One day, she came into the art room and offered me a spot in her weekly art class, which I accepted. I’m glad she did because she used to bring me paint galore!

Dr. Burroughs taught me how to teach by encouraging people. Nobody taught me, so I didn’t know how to teach right away. I’d teach others art but look at their work and say, “Man, you can’t even draw a straight line! What’s wrong with you?” I was putting dudes down instead of lifting them up. I was being hard on others because I didn’t know how to teach. And then I saw how Dr. Burroughs would teach. I’d try to get my students to think about what they were doing, and they would do some good work.

About a year ago, attorneys Jenny Sobel2 (former Assistant Federal Defender) and Wendy L. Bloom (from law firm Kirkland & Ellis LLP), went to bat for me and got me out of prison. They filed a clemency petition. On June 23, the guard came to my cell and said, “Pack your stuff, Chaney – you’re getting out of here.” I was released from prison after serving 33 years of a life sentence.

I didn’t know a lot of stuff when I got out. I was taken to a hotel. An elevator took me up to the floor my room was on. The next day, I couldn’t get the elevator to work. I pushed the button, but the elevator didn’t come, so I took the stairs. I didn’t know that you had to swipe a card to get the elevator to work.

And those smart phones. You can put music on phones now! I don’t mess with that. There are cars that talk to you (GPS) and people charging you an arm and a leg for anything. I went to a store and bought some potato chips, corn chips and candy and they wanted $20.50! It costs $4 to buy a mocha coffee.

I am presently living with Bill Ryan. For my first 60 days out of prison I had to wear an electronic monitor on my ankle. I had to be inside from 7 pm to 7 am. They actually called Bill’s house to check up on me once at 4:30 am. Now, I am making art full-time in Bill’s garage, which I converted to my art studio. My goal is to get a bigger art studio, and anyone getting out of the joint can have a job helping me out. That’s what I want to do.

My advice to those that are in prison is don’t give up. If you give up, then you ain’t got no hope. It’s like a dude in a race who says he can’t win; he can’t win because he said he can’t. Keep hope alive. That’s what I’ve been saying all of this time: keep hope alive.

To purchase artwork by Arkee Chaney, visit www.arkeestudios.com

1 – See Stateville Speaks May 2011 issue for an article about Dr. Burroughs
2 – Jenny Sobel is now the Executive Director of the Illinois Prison Project, who is working for clemency for two groups of prisoners: former military veterans, and prisoners who are serving life under the “three strikes” law. See Stateville Speaks Fall/Winter 2019 issue for more about the Project. ■
CHANGING THE NARRATIVE  By Alann Vega

It’s not uncommon to hear how Angola prison has changed its narrative from a negative past to the model prison it is today. Similarly, in spite of the most popular beliefs and propaganda, Stateville C.C. has also changed its narrative. The once most infamous known Larry Hoover era here at Stateville C.C. no longer exists. Instead, Stateville has moved into a new era, the era of being a model prison for other prisons here in Illinois.

In 2019, Stateville C.C. bared witness to seven resident students receive their Bachelor of Arts degrees. It was the first cohort of students to graduate with a degree in Stateville in over two decades. Today, North Park University through its School of Restorative Arts here at Stateville, now has two cohorts in pursuit of their master’s degree. Additionally, Northwestern and the Northeastern University UWW (University Without Walls) program has also moved into the new year with their second cohorts.

To make things even better, Stateville C.C. also bared witness to guest appearances from Lauren Daigle, Angela Y. Davis, Chance the Rapper, Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton and many State Reps. from Illinois. And of course, I cannot forget to mention our Debate Team as they shined light on Illinois’ lack of a comprehensive parole system.

Yet, there is still much work that needs to be done by residents, IDOC administrators, society and politicians. After all, it is evident that Stateville C.C. is no longer the prison it used to be. Certainly, there are still problems and potential dangers, but they are not different than any other parts of the world we live in today.

Ultimately, time will tell if IDOC administrators are genuine in their support of programs that can bring transformative change for its residents. However, IDOC administrators cannot overlook that in order to bring forth transformative change; it must lead by example. For example, wrong, negative, outdated perceptions and prejudices must be challenged in a constructive way. This will enable us to move forth with IDOC’s mission statement.

After all, the truth is no resident wants to reside in a dangerous environment. Likewise, no correctional staff wants to work in a dangerous environment either. So, in order for us to continue to change the narrative of Stateville C.C. each and every one of us needs to do their part. Yes, momentum is on our side to bring about changes within the criminal justice system in Illinois.

But the question is, what are you doing about it? How are you preparing yourself to present your case in front of a parole board when it comes? What

See VEGA, page 7

WHY BLACK HISTORY MATTERS  By Toussiant Daniels

There’s a movement going on in a prison located in Northwestern Illinois. Prison officials are partnering with prisoners in an effort to create programs that focus on rehabilitation. One such program is the Dixon Correctional Center Theatre Workshop.

It all began in early December when a group of concerned friends met in the library and started lamenting over the fact that prison officials were no longer organizing events to celebrate Black History Month in February. One of the members remarked, “that’s just disrespectful.” We all left that meeting feeling frustrated with no clear path toward how to make a change.

Unbeknownst to us change was already in the wind. A new Prison Chaplin, Patrick Stramka was appointed with a new outlook on ways to engage the prison population. He convened a meeting with several prisoners that he had grown familiar with from his previous assignment as a Dixon Correctional Officer. During that meeting he posed a question. “What do you guys want to do for Black History Month?”

As fate would have it one of the men from the library gathering was in attendance.

It was late December when we met with Chaplin Stramka. In this meeting we set a lot of goals:

Theme: “WHY BLACK HISTORY MATTERS”
Establishing a committee for Black History activities
a. Write a play  
b. Organize a poetry slam  
c. Organize a Hip-Hop Concert  
d. Promote an essay contest – winner will be judged by a committee  
e. Organize a “Round-Table Discussion” addressing social ills throughout our communities – inside and outside of prison; and  
f. Award Queen Mother Rev. Helen Sinclair and Pastor Manny Mills certificates for their long service of reforming the minds and spirits or prisoners throughout Illinois.

We only had a very short time to accomplish these goals. We definitely lacked experience. But it was the energy generated from this great opportunity that overrode our lack of experience – propelling us forward despite the enormities of our task.

We accomplished every goal that we set. And the entire program was a tremendous success; having a powerful impact on the culture of the entire prison population.

The positive feedback from the prison community – at large was so much so that it catapulted us into turning what was an opportunity of happenstance into what now has become The Dixon Theatre Workshop.

Once again using this energy from this “untapped potential.” Just this last summer we wrote and produced another play entitled “Broken Pieces,” as well as a spoken word event titled – “Dear Summer.” An anthology for a season of change.

Currently we are under production for another play and spoken word event for Latin Heritage Month.

In less than a year, we have accomplished a lot and yet there is so much more. In an effort to solidify our standing within the institution, we’ve developed six (6) core principles that we refer to as the “6-E’s,” which are:

1. Entertain the audience  
2. Educate the audience  
3. Engage the prison population to maintain their respect  
4. Encourage participants and observers to continue to support the initiative  
5. Earn the right to continue to write and perform  
6. Evolve into an ongoing and sustainable platform

Holding these principles at the forefront of who participates we hope to move and create an environment that allows Transformative Therapeutic Rehabilitation through the Arts.

P-E-A-C-E ■

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**IT TAKES A VILLAGE**

A few of us at Stateville Speaks had the opportunity to attend a speaking engagement at the Church of Peace in Rock Island IL, featuring speaker Anthony Gay along with Reverend Mariah Marlin-Warfield.

While still a teen, Gay got into a fight with another young man and was ultimately charged with robbery for taking the man’s hat and a dollar, a charge in which he received probation. On probation, Gay was caught driving without a license and was sentenced to serve his remaining 3 ½ years in prison. Admittedly, having mental health issues, Gay was unable to cope and began acting out, with most of his behavior involving self-mutilation. Instead of receiving mental help, Gay was placed in solitary confinement, ultimately receiving two life sentences, with an outdate of 2152. While Gay was ultimately released, partially due to public outcry, mostly due to great lawyers, he did so after serving 24 years, with 22 of them in solitary confinement, mostly at the now closed Tamms Supermax.

What may seem like the end of this tragic story, indeed may also be the beginning of an equally important one. The story of how a church and their members reached out and organized letter writing to Gay and others in solitary confinement. Letters, in which they tried to inspire and give hope to those in unthinkable circumstances.

While relieved to be out of prison, it is apparent that Gay’s mental uncertainty did not end with his sentence. Nor did the support of his church. It was quite inspiring to all that attended to see how Gay, himself, Reverend Mariah and the congregation is helping Gay overcome the injustices he has endured, while wanting those still facing solitary/segregation/administrative detention to know that they are not alone.

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**NEW BOOKS WRITTEN BY OUR READERS**

*Rope of Hope*

By Anthony Gay

*Rope of Hope: Conversations Between Ego and Alter Ego* is a compilation of inspirational rhetorical writings and conversations. These conversations helped keep Anthony’s mind healthy and focused while enduring the severe effects of solitary confinement over the course of 22 years. “The only way to believe is to believe from the heart. The only way to believe from the heart is to believe in hope. Never close the door on hope, leave it open, it’s the only way a miracle can walk in.” Available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, AbeBooks, and wherever books are sold.

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*The Forgotten Tales of El Capitán*

By Alex Negron

*The Forgotten Tales of El Capitán* will keep you on the edge of your seat! You will find yourself chanting “Viva La Mar!” and “Viva El Capitán!” as you flip through the pages. Capitán Alejandro De Los Amantes and his rebel band will take you on a voyage that will leave you begging for more! Alex Negron uses Latin American history, folklores and his imagination to weave this intriguing story. It is filled with passion, love, valor, and honor! Join El Capitán and become a Protector of the Seven Seas to fight against oppressive sovereigns and thieving pirates! Fight besides El Capitán for a cause greater than your own - the world’s existence is at stake. Available at Midnight Express, Amazon, Googlebooks, and wherever books are sold. 10% of all sales go to North Park’s Prison Education Project.

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**TAKE TIME**

By Wille Scales

Take time to help each other and they in turn will help you!
Take time to look for wonderful ways to make new ideas work, not for reasons they won’t!
Take time to love another thru all the difficult days!
Take time to maintain a positive attitude no matter what the circumstances are!
time to put God first in our lives today!

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**VEGA**

from page 6

do you have to offer to serve with your community? Are you taking advantage of non-credit or credited programs offered at your facility? If none are available, don’t wait for anybody, instead educate yourself. Malcom X did it, so you do it! Thus, in order for you to change the narrative of your environment, you must first change your personal narrative.
FEAR

By Leo Cardez

Fear is one of the most powerful forces on the planet. The enemy of change, stealer of ambition, the champion of the half-measure. It dulls the shine of a new idea. Fear is the handcuffs on your soul.

None of us can pretend to be fearless. Yet every day we have the chance to decide how much influence our fears deserve. I wasted a lifetime allowing my fears to dictate my decisions. I had to choose to leave traditional thinking behind. I wouldn’t fear what the world had to say about me. Instead of cowering behind social stigmas seeking to dehumanize me or worrying about challenges, I would simply make the life I wanted. It alone is a statement of defiance to traditional thinking.

So, since that epiphany, my passion has reflected my heart rate. Fast, good. Slow, bad. I figure if something excited me tremendously, like writing a piece for Stateville Speaks, then it’s a worthwhile endeavor. If not, then not.

It’s a liberating thing leaving fear by the wayside and pursuing your life’s purpose. And the funny thing about it is that the most successful people are more revered, more awarded, and more victorious in life precisely because they didn’t caution their way and temper their enthusiasm.

A person of any form should never compromise, settling for something less than their full potential. If you agree, consider making that change today. It’s not the most expected path you could take, and it certainly won’t be the easiest, but a little pain can be a good thing. Change can be found through pain.

Change takes fierce motivation, practice, and repetition. The science of it almost guarantees most of us will fail. Then again, some of us won’t.

The reality is there are countless inmates out there challenging the very nature of their being; constantly changing themselves for the better and reaching all-new levels of success. As inmates we have to believe in the possibility of change, purpose, and redemption, otherwise, we might as well be sunk in a barrel at the bottom of the ocean. It’s a despair familiar to anyone who has ever felt helpless. To be chained and locked up with no options – there is nothing worse.

I pray you believe in the power to transform yourself and find greatness – even after massive failure – to find the freedom and hope that only the pursuit of your life’s purpose can bring. Remember, it all begins with finding the courage to let go of your fear.

Updates from Chicago Votes

Chicago Votes is a non-partisan, non-profit organization building a more inclusive democracy by putting power in the hands of young Chicagoans. We do this through a number of initiatives, including our Unlock Civics program. This program works to dismantle barriers to civic engagement for people impacted by the American Legal System. In 2019, Chicago Votes helped pass “The Re-entry Civics Education Act” which requires every person leaving prison in Illinois to receive 3, ninety-minute civic classes. Now, due to COVID, people leaving prison should receive our 30-page curriculum. Currently, we are working to pass our Unlock Civics Policy Platform, with the help of a 60-organization coalition, and we’d love your involvement too!

Our Unlock Civics Policy Platform includes the following bills:

- VOTING IN PRISON, HJRCA0033 & HB4377: Clarifies language in the IL constitution to allow people in prison to vote.
- EARNED DISCRETIONARY RELEASE, SB3233: Establishes that after serving 20 years, a person is eligible to have their case heard in front of the Parole Review Board.
- END PRISON SLAVE LABOR ACT, SB2929: Expands the state minimum wage to include people serving a sentence at the Illinois Department of Corrections.
- JUDICIAL QUALITY ACT, SB3573: Ensures Judges receive quarterly training on racial bias, child abuse, and the impact of trauma on youth brain development.
- JURY QUALIFICATION, SB2525: This bill provides that no person who is qualified and able to serve as a juror may be excluded from jury service on the basis of a previous criminal record.
BLACK LIVES DON’T MATTER

LET’S KEEP IT 100% By Larry Frazier

The American Way, hypocrisy wrapped up in a star-spangled red, white, and blue cloak of liberty and justice for all. Except the fact that it is stitched in the fabric of racial hatred, injustice, and inequality, which all leave black lives still lingering far from the shores of the American dream, to many it’s only a mirage. It is the American-sleight-of-hand justice, in reality the three-card molly justice.*

The kind of justice that fills American jails and prisons with a steady supply of black bodies funneled by a so-called American criminal justice system that disproportionately, and unfairly targets black men who put themselves in the line of fire.

Black lives don’t matter, for the longest time we have been, and are counted like sheep, led to be slaughtered. And yet, we as black men are chief among the slayers – leaving a trail of young black men in urban streets, filled with our blood and warm corpses, making the mortician wealthy.

Black lives don’t matter, in part because as black men we are our own worst enemy because it doesn’t matter to us, we kill each other. It is pervasive-this hate of the black body. It is a hate rooted in America’s original sin called slavery. A 400- year that has maintained and murdered black people since we arrived as slaves upon American shores in 1619. A 400-year albatross hanging around the neck of some Americans like a chain.

It’s the same insatiable, encumbered blood thirsty hate that fueled the red summer of 1919 and the deadly attacks against blacks by whites across America. The same hate in 1919 (and beyond) that has now been ingrained in us and that of which we now lethally execute on ourselves. We become madly upset when a white person kills someone black, especially if that white person is a police member. But, yet why have we come to accept the murder of our kids by our kids? What! We can kill each other, but whites can’t, that’s absurd. Wake up Black America! I, myself, am incensed by the constant news of my people being systematically eliminated by the murder of one and the imprisonment of the murderer, as I am by the murder of a black kid by a white cop. And I am more incensed by the murder of two of my nephews on the same street on the east side of Chicago, which has made this personal to me.

It’s time that we stop blaming white America for our demise, it’s time to look in the mirror because the inequality, the injustice, the lies haven’t just begun. This country was built on lies, deception, thievery, and murder. And if you don’t believe me, just ask the Indians, the true Native Americans.

*Three-card-molly refers to the shill game of two black jacks and a red queen, in which you try and pick the red queen. While you may think you are able to follow, as the dealer shuffles and periodically shows you what they are doing, you can’t as he is able to pick up two cards at once. Additionally, there is a second person in on it that “shows” everyone how easy it is to win. ■

QUOTÉ OF THE DAY By Martin McCoy

“Change is a bolt cutter that requires people with enough strength to handle the pressure needed to break their chains.”

WHEN JUSTICE DIES By Dennis Pearson

American Justice began as an angry and hopeful response to centuries of barbarism and conquest, beset by torturous inquisitions, fostered by legions of petty tyrants and malignant overloads, who would sacrifice bloody multitudes of innocent victims to gain the power and riches their malevolent hearts so fiendishly desired.

After its inception, American Justice became a standard bearer for the world, a beacon of hope, igniting feverish passions in the hearts of the masses. Sunshine replaced centuries of gloom, while dreams of a benevolent world swelled ever mightily in those multitudes of righteous and hopeful hearts. The American ideal of justice became an irresistible force, steamrolling and crushing everything that would deny its course, heralding a fantastic future never before seen, or imagined, by the masses in their wildest dreams.

The success of an empire is predicated upon its judicial system, which oversees every aspect of society, and which is maintained through politics and wars. When the judicial system of an empire falls, the empire falls. And because politicians are the caretakers of the judicial system, and the brokers of wars, they, and they alone, must suffer the blame when the judicial system of a nation fails and the empire falls.

The American Judicial system is broken, consequently the empire is failing and falling faster than even the most optimistic among us can possibly imagine. Like falling dominos, state after state is going bankrupt and becoming poverty ridden. And unless the deterioration is reversed, by the end of the next decade or two, America will become just another squalid, backward “banana republic” infested with every kind of human deprivation and ignorance that has plagued fallen empires throughout history.

The solution for stopping the American decline is simple and easily implemented: Elect caring and responsible politicians who will put America’s welfare before their own selfish aspirations… and eliminate any who violate such a trust. ■

REVITALIZED By Patrick Comi

As my heart melts into fury, with no one to console me, love seems to be a distant memory. My heart has been ripped apart, feasted upon, and devoured by vengeance. Loneliness is a soothing pain in which I find sorrowful comfort. How could I ever go on living this way; abandoned and left just as my last breath slipped into nothingness?

I have been judged, condemned to pity by those who live in misery but purged are my resurrected thoughts. I received the ultimate of being nailed to the cross, then placed into the bottomless pit where I came face to face with myself: Will. I had the key all the time but was refusing to accept it; the key is compassion.

Gifted as I may be, with a lifted mentally, essentially, I am Will, and everything is a manifestation of it.

Revitalize yourself. ■

To subscribe to Stateville Speaks, or to make a donation or sponsor an issue, see page 11 for details.
**BACK TO NORMAL**

By Patrick Comi

Because I cannot change the color of my skin
All I can do is pray that normality includes
Compassion and opportunities for me to progress and the ceasing of
Killing my kith and kin
Terrorism manifesting in high places
Only us living in fear of wicked faces
No matter how the years go by
Old scars, new wounds
Racism alive and well reminding us of miasma
hanging strange fruits
Melting pot of democracy yet still needing
A hand to find
Lady Liberty

**REFLECTIONS**

By April Goodman

If your heart does not wrench
If your tears do not flow
How can you say you’re American?
If you feel not American at all

Cry for Ahmaud, cry for Breonna
Cry for police who true fairness seeks
Cry for our children we spared not
The protests, the havoc, the crimes throughout

Justice is slow, but may it be sure
No innocents falsely destroyed in a blur
In kindred spirits may we join together
And not by our actions tear us under

**FORGOTTEN**

By Ian Valencia

I’m searching for that spark to ignite me,
My Ember is slowly fading…
Memories of summers past have passed,
The moon and shining stars no longer amaze me…

I stoke the fire in my heart,
I don’t want to grow cold…
But I’m losing feeling in my fingers,
Life is getting old…
My arms are getting tired,
I’m losing the strength to care…”
Yet my effort goes unnoticed-
I’m the forgotten prize horse at the fair…
CONFIRMED CASES OF COVID-19 IN IL STATE PRISONS

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Source: IDOC Website. Information as of October 1, 2020

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YOUR PAST MISTAKES ARE MEANT TO GUIDE YOU...

...NOT TO DEFINE YOU!

"WELCOME HOME, DADDY!"

BY ARKEE