



# Perspectives:

MIAMI THROUGH A DIFFERENT LENS

Volume 2 | 2018

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## Acknowledgements

A special thank you to the women at Halle Place who agreed to take part in our Exchange for Change and for sharing their stories with us.

Thank you to Joshua Schriftman and George Franklin for facilitating the Exchange for Change program with the prisoners at Everglades Correctional Institution. Further thanks to Joshua Schriftman for helping all the students work together and giving the students everything they needed to succeed. Thank you also to Jason for the cover art.

# Table of Contents

Letter from the Editors	3
Letters from ECI: Exchange for Change	4
ECI: Questionnaire	18
Reflection Papers	22
Halle Place Stories	39

# Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

We hope you enjoy this year's edition of *Perspectives: Miami Through a Different Lens*. In an attempt to gain a better understanding for the society we live in, we've woven together the stories of University of Miami students and those of various marginalized groups. This year, we spoke to men in the Everglades Correctional Institute and women in the Halle Place who are completing their journey to re-enter society. Students at UM and ECI shared their thoughts during the semester on a common piece of literature: George Orwell's *1984*. They were able to foster a thoughtful and creative dialogue with their respective partners. Communicating with people in ECI and Halle Place both resulted in a greater understanding of other points of view. Reflective papers on students' experiences with their ECI partners are included to demonstrate the transformative effect the exchange had on them.

This journal also includes selected works from students enrolled in upper-level English classes at UM. These submissions highlight the students' passion for all things justice – they speak of a history of societal wrongs and the actions that may rectify them. Throughout the collection are several pieces of artwork and photography as well. Jimmy Green, a writer in a Trauma Journaling class at Dade Correctional Institution, created the portraits featured in the Halle Place section. Jason is the artist behind our cover, and another piece of his is included in the questionnaire section.

As editors, we have had the experience of reading through all of these insights and experiences from so many different voices. We hope that this journal will be an opportunity to learn about the experiences of our students as well as the men and women of ECI and Halle Place.

Sincerely,

ENG231/SOC 291 Fall 2018

# Letters from ECI: Exchange for Change

*The University of Miami and Everglades Correctional Institution collaborated in a program called Exchange for Change, where each University of Miami student received a letter-exchange partner from the prison. Through this program, both partners wrote under a pseudonym. Each week, students wrote a letter to their partners on a variety of topics. Both classrooms read 1984 by George Orwell. The text served as a point of discussion for many of the students' and inmates' letters, although many of the exchange partners chose to write about other topics besides the text.*

*These exchanges were a way for those in prison to feel connected to the outside world. Through the exchange program, this often-voiceless community could have an outlet through which they could have their voice be heard and paid attention to. For the university students, this program served to expose them to a marginalized community that they may not have previously had any interactions with. It is a way for them to become more politically aware, open-minded, accepting, and less judgmental. This was a good learning and bonding experience for the partners on both sides of the wall, as it allowed both groups to better understand each other, despite their apparent differences.*

*Each University of Miami student selected a letter, or part of a letter, from their partner that most impacted him or her. This section features those excerpts.*

## **Bull to Gemini:**

*This excerpt is from Bull's letter to Gemini on November 1:*

Being the oldest of my siblings and in prison feels like such a terrible example. But I still motivate them and give them the best advice I can. The second oldest (my first brother) says he still listens to me and looks up to me. But I've been told by outsiders that 'I have no right to tell my siblings or anyone else how to live their lives look at where I'm at.' I rebuke this type of mentality because there is a lot of knowledge behind these walls, great character, and overall just some good, normal people. Of course, if I knew then what I know now I'd be better off. Now though since I have to live out my situation as I find...it important to keep spreading that knowledge and leadership and be a man.

*This excerpt is from Bull's letter on November 8:*

I wouldn't choose to commit crime again, but the consequences of my actions have been worth it. I'll never let these people get me in here ever again. I live for a reason, with a cause, to develop a message from the knowledge I acquired in here. Many other men and I in the system have made up our minds that this is not the life we were destined to live forever. We shall survive one of the most traumatic instances some of us will ever face. Realistically this will not be on 100% recovery rate for some guys they may have to take this trip another time or two before they get it. It's possible for the mindset of life to be different every time around.

## David Rhodes to Charlie:

Greetings Dear Charlie,  
Happy Halloween

How are you doing?  
I just know that you enjoyed your trip to Philly, as I read it wasn't too hot and relaxed, I'm sure that it was more hectic on vacation than your student schedule. I been to Philly once, when I was stationed at our Embassy in Wash. DC. A long time ago when the dinosaurs still roamed the planet.

As you can imagine there is not too much going on in here. The same routine day in - day out, even the weekends are run on that timeless schedule. Thank goodness there are TV's, radio's and now those tablets. Otherwise the doc wouldn't need a deathrow, we would all die from boredom. Wouldn't that save a lot of tax-payers money?

Okay, let's start with this boring book that I can't get into. After a few pages I loose total interest in it.

However, I read your letter with undivided attention. You can easily replace the name Oceania with the following names of countries: North Korea, China, Russia, the entire Middle East.

I'm certain that we both can agree on the next statement. The economy is very stable, the jobless rate is going down and the Dow is gaining points. Signs that investors have confidence in both the government and the Donald!

Ah, now let's move on to what I can describe "you will love to hate my opinions again"!

Why would you even try to change the political system under the Donald?

I believe that there is nothing wrong with him being president! but what is wrong is this 2 party system in the USA.. that is the problem!! it's either blue or red, hot or cold, high or low. under this system there is no middle ground, and the current politicians see as if making a compromise is being the weak link in the system.. so we have a constant stalemate.. the winners are the politicians and their cronies. The losers are the people, the working class.

Most European countries, Belgium included, have at least 7 major political parties.. it gives the people more options to choose from.. and no party will ever get the 51%.. so the winner will have to make deals, compromises in order to make a coalition and govern the country.

Ah, another good one! Now what makes you think that the Donald is not qualified to be president? Let me start a little list with people similar to the Donald.. lack of political experience.. Governor and president Ronald Reagan, Governor Arnold.. I guess being a movie star makes you qualified? Governor Jesse Ventura.. a WWF wrestler!?

Oh, don't forget Hillary.. what made her qualified to be a Senator.. just by riding on Bill's coattails?

The only thing what's wrong with Donald is he won't stick to the script.



But then if the Donald would stick to the script he would become just another politician.. another mouth piece for the party... don't forget that almost 60 million people voted for him.. his base, his supporters people who were tired of the same "make lots of promises - then do nothing" politicians. The people voted! instead of fighting and doing everything possible to undermine him, why not work together, as it suppose to be! and get the best trade deals, make the borders safe, get a universal health care system, get the jobs back! get people elected who will compromise and who will represent the people who will unite instead of divide, who will build a bridge, instead of destroy..

I believe that I have made the strongest points to say that the Donald is right now the best man to lead this country.

Warm greets,

David Rhodes

## **David Rhodes to Madam President:**

*Excerpt from letter #5 written on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

Last week the newsletter organized an essay contest. The topic: 'A memorable Holiday or moment' and I believe that I have a story that fits...

are you ready to become my essay judge?

### **Part I**

1939... The Germans invaded Poland using their "Blitzkrieg" tactic. Since then, the rest of Europe was on an edge. Countries mobilized.

After observing the destruction and deaths of the Great War, the world was convinced another war of that magnitude would never happen again. Countries' militaries were mostly used to quell civil unrest and assist during natural disasters. While the world stood by and watched, Germany built their armament, and in the morning hours of May 10, 1940, the Earth at the eastern border between the small kingdom of Belgium and Germany trembled.

Rumblings could be heard in the distance as the German army was on the move. The Belgian military with their outdated tanks, trucks, planes and weapons were outmatched by the roaring advancing German juggernaut. Amid fierce fighting and some heroic resistance, Belgium surrendered on May 28<sup>th</sup>.

In 1942 with the tide turning against Germany, my Grandfather along with other able-bodied men were rounded up, forced on trains and transported into already war ravaged Germany to work in their factories.

Early 1943, almost every night the allies continued their air bombardments on German cities, bridges, electrical plants, and factories. In the city of Stuttgart, bombs rained from the sky, factories were leveled and Grandpa became a causality of friendly fire. He was buried in a 10 person mass grave.

### **Part II**

I was born May '63. My loving grandmother raised me; she had re-married after the war ended. By sheer coincidence his name was also Rifin. We lived in a turn of the century built old farmhouse. There were amenities, however, the first ten years I had to use an outhouse.

The Grandpa that I knew died after a long battle with an illness when I was 7. Grandma told me many happy stories of the Grandpa I never met. While talking about him I could see that sparkle in her eyes.

Shortly after I turned 17 I decided to join the Belgium Air Force. I got stationed with a small Belgium detachment at one of the largest US Air Force bases in Germany. Grandma showed only little interest in the gifts I brought her... so I wanted to do something very special for her... I brainstormed... I had a crazy idea... in my mind I started to formulate a plan.

Could I pull this off?

With the assistance of the US military, I was able to acquire the information I needed.

### Part III

One sunny weekend I set out on a 150-mile discovery trip. When I obtained the information, city officials included a detailed map with directions marked.

#### Author Spotlight Bios: *David Rhodes*

Early tragedy, walking circles, making differences.

My memoir in 6 words.

Hi, I'm David Rhodes, 55 years old, born in Belgium, a small country in Western Europe, raised by my loving grandmother. I grew up in a small farmer's town, where luxury is measured by how old... or new the farm tractor was. At 17 years old, I joined the Belgian Air Forces. By the time I was 23, I got a plush assignment and got stationed at our Embassy in Washington DC. Bought a customized old van and traveled up and down the eastern part of the United States during my off-duty days. My struggles with personal issues brought me to Florida, where in '89 I ran afoul of the law. That's the first part of the 6 words, the next 2 are -- or is -- the time you could say "wasted" in prisons all across the state. In 2015, I participated in a Belgium TV series about Belgians in foreign prisons. After the series aired on Belgium TV, I received tons of mail from strangers who now became my friends. And I became social again. Prison did not make me into a bitter person; au contraire, I'm one of the happiest people in our Quad, and I like to share those smiles. My motto is "enjoy the little things life has to offer."

Wrong turns and dead ends are the norm on exploratory trips. But finally I found what I set out to look for. Now the hard part: Convincing Grandma to come on a trip to Germany with me.

In the summer of 1985, we started our sightseeing tour. Alternating between highway travel and the rolling hills of the scenic route, we reached the city of Stuttgart. A few of the earlier wrong turns remained, found

parking and hand in hand we walked along the well manicured green lush lawns.

Hand in hand, we stood still, both with tears rolling down, mine because I could present her with this special gift. Grandmas of both: sadness of having found the long lost love, and happiness of finally being able to say goodbye.

This will always and forever be my most memorable moment.

Standing in front of an old stone marker, engraved 6 lines from the top:

“Rifin Uuttersprot (Rel) & Mörz 1943”

### **Othello to Ashakiran:**

Like you, I have an intense dislike for injustice. My "Ray of Hope" I am not an innocent person nor am I innocent of my crime. I learned about injustice the worst way, by being unjust. At the time I didn't view my actions as being so, but the truth is what I did was wrong and I must pay my debt to society. I do believe that I am a changed man and that I have earned a 2nd chance. I don't want to mislead you, I rather people hate <sup>me</sup> for who I am than to love me for pretending to be someone else. I am not a "sick monster" but I did do something wrong. There are injustices that felons and ex-felons must face. The right to vote, once ~~was~~

### **Othello to Murphy:**

For some years now, I have been living in a community of men from various backgrounds. I have seen the best and worst of man. I have met righteous men who have sinned and seen sinners do noble acts. I see the good and bad in people and realize that I am the same. To live a life of honesty you must have clear eyes and an open heart.

I will not repay your honesty and trust with intolerance. That's not love. A long time ago I made a promise to show love no matter what. I will not let any difference of opinion affect our exchanges. Please keep being open and honest with me. I promise to do the same.

### **Author Spotlight Bios: *Othello***

I want to be known as a person who embraced the good inside himself. The good part of one's self that we all inherit. The idealism and naivety of a child. As a man who made mistakes but did not let those mistakes define him.

I am a Hispanic male that has been incarcerated for several years. In that time, I have lived in close proximity to a lot of different men. Some have become good friends, mentors, role models, and leaders that any person would follow. Together we have helped one another to become accountable. Because of these men I have gratitude for the small blessings that every day brings. I now see the silver lining in the limitless sky.

I threw myself into a dark pit and found hope. True hope, a belief that an expectant outcome will occur. I hope to be a good man. The belief is that if I continue to choose what is good, then I will become good and Righteous. I am here now to serve others with kindness, humility, and respect. In short, I want to be known as someone who gives back to society.

## **Montana to Dolphina:**

Hello Dolphina,

I think in here and out there, there exist a little rebel in all of us. In here I do favor the mindset of Julia, but at times, looking back, I can see where I've pushed back against the system.

Oceania is like the Mafia, both operate outside the law and if you disagree with either, you simply vanish.

And yes, in here Big Brother is always watching. So many cameras these days, but I welcome that and I think, in here, there should be more. The cameras deter crime. People are not so quick to break the rules when they know the camera will catch it.

Following the rule has always been easy for me. Even when I was a child I never really had a problem following the rule.

Even now, I've gone my entire sentence thus far without a single write up. (13 years so far). And even though I am in prison, I still consider myself a man of integrity.

I am guilty of my crime, but that doesn't define who I am. All that does is point out that at one time in my life I broke the law and now I am paying for it.

I am thankful that I only have 56 months left because, like Winston, I am growing tired of Big Brother (prison) and I'm ready to leave here and start trying to rebuild my life. I'll be 51 years old when I walk out the gate. I have no savings and no money. I'll have 14 years until I reach 65 and that's not a lot of time to build a retirement.

That's why I want to start my food truck. That, and my novels I hope will be enough so that I may retire at 65 and enjoy a world free from prison. I have so many places I want to go and so many things I want to see!

I want to watch the ball drop on New Year's Eve in Times Square in New York! I want to see the Grand Canyon and the redwood forest! I would love to see your homeland and Israel!

In here and in the book 1984, everyone seems to have lost their sense of adventure. Winston has his journal but Julia, what does she have? And everyone has seemed to have lost any ambition! It's like everyone's spirit is so oppressed that it's ceased to exist.

I relate to Julia in here because for now I keep all my thoughts to myself. And I try my best to hide what I think because my mind will never conform to this world. I do not believe in mass incarceration, or the oppression of people. But because I don't want to do or say anything that could prevent me from going home. That is my focus and I can't say or do anything that could hinder that. I'm still not done with the book but so far it looks like Winston nor Julia will flee and head over to Eurasia. They both believe they are soon to be caught and killed, but yet they do nothing to try and flee. It's like a frog in a pot of water. You turn on the heat and the frog will never jump out. It will sit there and be boiled alive. And so far that is Winston and Julia.

It's always a joy reading what you have to say. And I look forward to your next response and prompt. Until then, please be blessed!

## **Dreamer to Juliana:**

Today is October 31st, 2018 and as the divided states of America celebrates Halloween, my mind wanders to a state of concern. And I wonder, and the thoughts of Oceania come to me. How really different, is the government that oppresses the millions of us who are being held captive behind these razorwired fences, and the one in which Winston finds himself in? You say that you really don't want to be Winston or Julia, but although you may not realize it, you already are one of them. And your thoughts are not jumbled, and yes I can make sense of them. You say that you believe in doing what's right and you associate that with Winston.

### **Author Spotlight Bios: *Dreamer***

I am a proud father of two sons ages 23 and 20. I am a poet, a songwriter, a singer in a Spanish worship church band at Everglades Correctional Institution. I grew up in a border town in South Texas, without a father. My childhood was tough, but I have always been a Dreamer. I enrolled with the exchange for change writing program about 3 ½ years ago, and this program has truly been a blessing because the department of corrections has stopped funding educational programs, and no writing program such as this one existed in prisons of Florida. I have also taken a songwriting class, which allowed me to release the song that had always existed inside my heart. An Exchange For Change student volunteer from UM taught this class. Our songs were recorded and showcased last year at the Frost School of Music with a video showing the lyrics of our songs. I have taken poetry, memoir, even Shakespeare, as well as creative writing, Flash Fiction with an FIU professor, and film class, and I am going to continue participating in Exchange for Change because I fly free on the wings of my pen! I will never get to physically get out from behind these razor wire gates, yet I have been "free" since joining the Exchange for Change family.

My letters to my UM partners truly explain who I am, but my most cherished title that truly defines me is a "DAD!" Although I have spent the past 20 years of my life behind the razor wire gate, I have always been a loving Dad to my precious 2 sons. I have "held" their hands through the "storms" of their lives. You see friends, a Father's love can never be imprisoned, and I love my sons! My own father abandoned me, and never told me "I love you, son." He expressed his love through falling tears as he laid on his deathbed, intubated while I spoke into his ear telephonically as my youngest brother held his phone to his ear. We made peace.

As far as my cultural background, I am an American citizen of Mexican Descent, 48 years young! I chose "Dreamer" as my pseudonym because I have dreams of my own, and because of the Dreamers that Trump wishes to deport. We are all dreamers in a sense; it is what motivates us to go on, even in the midst of the "storms" of life. In closing, my dream is that our exchange will be more than just another class assignment. And although you shall never know my true identity, nor I yours, God knows, and you shall always be in his prayers.

## Invictus to Antares:

Dear Antares,

I send greetings from Beautiful Downtown Everglades, a “Gated Community” just minutes from the famous Miccosukee Hotel and Casino. The other day, I took a walk around the compound... I checked out the 12 foot high cyclone fences topped by the 3 foot roll of razor wire. There were no watch towers, or guards with high powered rifles keeping an eye on things, but we did have a white sedan with black tires slowly making the rounds. Certainly a real shotgun was...um...riding shotgun.

Heard the chick chick boom- pop-pop-pop pop pop...pop of gunfire on the range and the yelping of the bloodhounds in their nearby kennels. So I went back to my dorm and made a note in my journal: “The perimeter is secure! If things continue to spiral out of control, we should be able to stop the locals from trying to sneak in and steal our food.” Ha!

*On November 15, Invictus wrote the following poem to Antares. He was inspired by W.H. Auden’s “September 1, 1939, and introduced the poem by saying:*

“If Orwell had been sitting next to Auden in the bar on fifty-second st., What would he have said?

That’s an interesting thought -- W.H. Auden was writing about the horror of a world war that was about to be unleashed, while 1984 was a reflection upon where the world might be headed after the conflict was ended, and what would civilization do for an encore.

The poem entitled ‘Hardline Views’ would have been my contribution to the conversation if I had been there at the bar with them. :)”



# Hardline Views

By Invictus

Each time we turn on the evening news  
Our stress levels can begin to rise –  
As images of a world gone mad abuse  
Our sensibilities and assault our eyes.

And yet, as in the days of Noah,  
People just running to and fro –  
As punch drunk as Rocky Balboa  
Trying to shake off another blow.

If the “signs of the times” were neon lights  
Perhaps then it would get our attention –  
Or revolution reduced to sound bites,  
Labeled “Time for an intervention.”

Well we’ve got wars and rumors of wars,  
And those earthquakes in diverse places -  
The devil roars while the world ignores,  
The signs of the times flashed in our faces.

Can we be so blind that we cannot see  
That the handwritings there on the wall –  
And what’s unfolding as prophecy  
Let those who stand take heed lest they fall.

Yet some Gospel of prosperity,  
Is what seems to be filling the pews –  
And so many of us just refuse to see  
Those revelations on the evening news.

There will be weeping and gnashing of  
teeth  
On a day when it’s least expected  
For those who chose the path of disbelief  
By when the world of truth was reflected.

Well I know I’d be much more popular  
If I wrote things people wanted to hear  
Or if I chose to hold a seminar  
With words catered to the itching ear.

But it’s not me that’s being rejected  
It’s all plainly written there in the book –  
The Word of God is being neglected,  
Perhaps it’s time we all took another look.

## **Mr. Wall Street to Ronnie Rassi:**

I am dearly intrigued with your interest in all things concerning “Mr. Wall Street.” Well, let’s begin by saying the transition of leaving Africa and growing up in America has been nearly a 500-year ordeal. I was born in Tampa, Florida (1960) and I am still catching hell like my ancestors did when they first came to America.

But you know what, America has been good for me, I just haven’t been good always for America.

I graduated from Florida A&M University in Jneu 1981 with a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering. I pledged a Greek fraternity while I was at Florida A&M University.

I pledged Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, you know who I’m talking about. The smooth, cool players who wear the red and white and do their steps and drills with a “walking cane.”

Well, my fraternity brothers gave me the name, “Mr. Wall Street” because I was always about my business (selling drugs), and I was always dressed and pressed like a Wall Street corporate titan. Shoes shining, well groomed, and calling shots like a real gangster, that’s how I became Mr. Wall Street.

After graduation I was offered a job with Lockheed Martin Aerospace Corporation in New Orleans. We were designing and building space capsules and structures for the international space station. I also was a senior test engineer for NASA in New Orleans, manufacturing the “space shuttle external tanks,” a twenty-six-million-dollar product.

I was employed by NASA when challenger (blew-up), exploded in 1986. That is before you were born. I lived in New Orleans for many many years. As a matter of fact, I actually bought my first home in New Orleans. I was living in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina flooded the city in August 2005. I have been around.

# ECI: Questionnaire

*Some of the students at the University of Miami put together a questionnaire to better understand where their partners come from. Four students behind bars decided to answer the questions posed to them in the questionnaire: Dreamer, David Rhodes, Jason, and Montana. This section contains the questions on the questionnaires and these four partners' answers to the questions.*

## 1. Who has been the most impactful person in your life? Why?

### **Dreamer:**

My mother, because she taught me how to never give up, even in the midst of the “storms” of life. She showed me unconditional love and sacrifice, at times going without meals in order for us to have an extra portion. She instilled in me the act of forgiveness and courage.

### **David Rhodes:**

My grandparents. I grew up with them, as my dad at the time had more love for his big bottle of beer than for his family. So, when I was born, my grandmother took me home with her. Grandpa died when I was about seven, but I do remember all his life stories. One of his sayings I will never forget and apply to my daily routines, each time I find myself in front of an obstacle. Grandpa used to say: “Always be smarter than the object you are working with.” Grandma also taught me valuable life lessons.

Growing up in Belgium in the 70s was not easy. We didn't have indoor plumbing until I turned 10 years old. I had to use an outhouse, a coal stove to heat up an old farmhouse, and I was schooled by Catholic nuns and brothers.

### **Jason:**

Who has impacted my life more than anyone else? I would have to say that the one person would have to be my stepmother. The reason why is because she is the one person who taught me what love is, in that even when I came to prison she was always there for me and in no way did she judge me. She always let me know that I was loved and missed. She showed me how to forgive even when I did not want to. She was my mother and my best friend and I will never forget her.

### **Montana:**

Robert Ryerson. He's like a father to me. He has not only stood beside me, but he's always believed in me and he always encourages me to be the best I can be.

He is a man of morals and integrity, with a heart of gold. If everyone could see the world the way he does and shared one-tenth of the love he does then the world would truly be a better place for all.

## **2. If your life was a book, what would you title it? Why?**

### **Dreamer:**

I would title the book: UNWANTED (the true story of a child born without a father who wanted him)

Why? Because that's how my life began, and although my mother did her best, I grew up with the pain of knowing that my father did not want me. Being unwanted truly wounded my heart and I was reminded daily of this when I saw that all of my friends had a father who loved them. Father's Day was the toughest day of the year for me, especially when at school our teachers would ask us to make a card for our father. As a young child up to my teenage years, I hated him. It was a tough life that I endured because he left. At times having to go house to house asking for a couple of eggs or potatoes to eat. He caused me so much pain, and not once did he ever tell me "I love you son" when I did visit him on those rare visits to his house. Even as an adult he stayed away, and in these past 20 years he never visited me in jail or prison, and never wrote to me. I forgave him, and he finally told me he loved me...

### **David Rhodes:**

"Early tragedy, walking circles, making differences" The first part of the story would be about the struggles in my childhood, teen years and as a young adult. The discovery of being "different" than the other guys in the youth group. Up to joining the military, more an escape from living in a small farmer's town, with a secret that I couldn't share with nobody at that time. Then up top of that, finding out that I also have a deadly disease, a heavy burden to carry. In 1989 my secret got exposed, not knowing how to deal with it, took a handgun and shot 2 innocent people. Found guilty in court and sentenced to life in prison. I just turned 26 years old. Walking circles are those years between 89 and 2015. A Belgian TV producer offered me an opportunity to tell my story to the Dutch-speaking population in Belgium. My story was the season's finale in the series about Belgians in a foreign prison. A few weeks after the airing of the episode I started to receive lots of letters, of people who wanted to get to know me, not as a murderer, but as a person.

### **Jason:**

A Life from Hate to Love. My life was not easy, raised by those who thought that their drinking was more important than I was. I never knew my birth parents and the abuse i suffered at the hands of other made me hate people as a whole and

did not want anyone in my life. That was until I met some people on the streets while I was homeless that taught me that no matter how people treat you, you need them in your life to help you grow. So, I had the privilege to go from a life of hate to a life of love. It was not an easy journey, but it made me stronger.

**Montana:**

The real Joe Dirt. Because my life is so close in reality to what the life of Joe Dirt was in that movie!



*By Jason*

# Reflection Papers

*This section features reflective papers written by students in the class at the University of Miami. For these papers, students selected a particularly impactful moment from their exchange with the students at ECI, and they tried to make sense of the experience by identifying how the experience made them feel and using outside research to explain why they had the reaction that they had.*

# Rattle Your Echo Chamber

Charlotte Mulica

The current political climate in the United States of America bolsters constant division in a country that is a melting pot of different cultures, ethnicities, backgrounds, and perspectives. Conflicting opinions on race generate a breeding ground for controversy and tension across the nation. The growing hostility produces a sensitive environment which limits conversation and interaction with diverse viewpoints, a moment in time where echo chambers invisibly encase each and every one of us. An echo chamber is a closed environment where personal beliefs amplify as they ricochet back, creating a safe place for people to speak their truth, no matter how racist or objectionable they may be. The most toxic echo chambers are often found in very racially isolated environments, as the lack of diversity creates a lack of accountability. When we find ourselves in these environments, it is our responsibility to acknowledge the overt or covert racism and stand up for the voices that aren't present. We need to take advantage of these environments where people feel comfortable to speak their truth about racism through a civil conversation about why and how we think the way we do. It is our responsibility as citizens to eradicate the echo chambers that are perpetuating racist ideologies and dividing the country.

My partner, Brasil, furthered my understanding of the perspective of someone who doesn't think racism currently exists to the extent it did in the past. In response to one of my letters, which acknowledged the existence of white supremacy and racism in the United States, Brasil replied that he does not believe in white supremacy and that he thinks "racism is not something that exists at the level people think it does or want it to. There are some racist people but most people are just normal individuals who want to live their lives and don't focus on race" (Letter 3, 1). Brasil believes race relations in American society have improved from the past, as he further clarified by saying, "society as a whole has grown past the point that racism is acceptable" (Letter 5, 1). To support his claim he used the example of the white reporter, Megyn Kelly, who received backlash for saying that blackface should be acceptable for halloween costumes. Brasil believes that the backlash was enough to show that racism is over and he added that the comment was "fairly benign and had no prejudicial intent" (Letter 5, 1). Brasil is under the impression that racism doesn't exist as much as people think it does. After reading this letter from Brasil, I kept coming back to the question, how can someone be in



one of the most oppressive systems in the country and not recognize the racism within?

Through further reflection and discussion, it became more clear to me how much of an echo chamber exists within Brasil's confined life in the prison system. As prison is used as a form of social control, the information Brasil receives is completely monitored and molds his scope of reality. In one of his letters, he stated, "I don't have the internet, I can't view any form of social media and my news sources are severely limited. Not to mention the people I interact with on a daily basis aren't typically the most educated demographic of society" (Letter 6, 3). Within prison, Brasil's echo chamber is amplified as he has minimal people to challenge his opinions on racism, based on the lack of education around him, as well as limited access to materials to educate himself. Brasil's perspective made me think of "Is This Kansas," by Eula Biss, who reflected on the opinions of her twenty three students at the University of Iowa. The "twenty-three tall, healthy, blond students" believed racism and sexism had "already been resolved a long time ago, during the sixties" (Biss 137). These students lived in an echo chamber where racism and sexism didn't exist, or at least didn't affect their lives. Brasil's life in prison puts him in the midst of a monocultural society where there is minimal education, and empathy for the inequalities in the outside world, resulting in a lack of opportunities and desire to challenge or discuss varying opinions regarding racism.

The only way to rattle our echo chamber is to seek out these opportunities and take the initiative to challenge and discuss our alternative opinions about racism; Brasil helped me learn this. My interaction with Brasil was so meaningful based on his willingness and open-mindedness to fully question and listen to my perspective, despite our different outlooks. He asked questions like "When you talk about racism happening more in today's world than people think, in what ways do you mean?" and "You talk about a system of oppression against people of color. Does this mean you think that the system is prejudice while the average citizen is not?" (Letter 5, 1). His readiness to question me forced me to arrange and articulate my most complex thoughts and opinions on how I see racism. The difficulty I found in organizing my thoughts into words to answer his questions, revealed my lack of experience in articulating these concept thoughts outside of my own head, as well as outside of my own echo chamber. Other than my classmates, the people I feel most comfortable explaining my opinions to about race and racism are my friends, because we all share the same viewpoint as we have grown up in the same generation and have similar backgrounds. This is a place I always feel comfortable to speak my truth because hearing agreement only solidifies my opinion. I don't feel as comfortable speaking my opinion about racism around my family because there is

no echo chamber present. My opinions won't be reiterated back to me and I will be left on an island to fight for myself and my opinion, making me feel vulnerable and uncomfortable.

For example, last year I purchased a pack of Black Lives Matter pins, for my backpack, on my family's Amazon account. When my mom asked me about them, I told her what I was using them for, she laughed and said, "Oh your dad and I thought you were going to pass them around at school or something," essentially making fun of me, it felt like at least. Moments like these are why I usually don't initiate these conversations with my family because my opinion is never understood and I leave feeling insecure about how I see things. All I want is for my opinion to be validated; this is why I keep going back to my echo chamber, and sharing my opinions about racism where they are agreeable. Although I often deviate from conversing with opinions that oppose mine, exchanging with Brasil highlighted the importance of these interactions. This exchange was a challenge for me because within my life my echo chamber has limited my interactions with people who share similar opinions as Brasil. Conversing about racism with him, someone outside of my echo chamber, has left me with a better understanding on how I see racism covertly functioning at the hands of mass incarceration, through deaminating and criminating the black skin tone, to successfully exploit, subordinate, and marginalize black bodies. Brasil helped me understand the extent of my echo chamber as well as the importance to venture out of it.

It is important to venture out of our echo chambers because infectious opinions fester in this country and are solidified when no one challenges these isolated ideologies, in turn amplifying them. Without disrupting this echo, the country will continue to divide and go down the same racist path. Being trapped in an echo chamber is a scary reality that is commonly seen across this country. An example can be seen at The University of Oklahoma Chapter Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity in 2015. The fraternity was caught posting a video which showed its' members celebrating the exclusion of African-American men from the fraternity through a song containing a racial slur and lynching references. Nolan L. Cabrera, an Assistant Professor of Higher Education at the University of Arizona conducted several studies where he interviewed white college students about their thoughts on race. Throughout this study, he found that the biggest problem was that the "housing" for Greek life catered to an environment with a lack of diversity and a lack of accountability for things that are said. He states, "so it becomes this major echo chamber where it is OK to say things like this on a regular basis," he also added that these situations only happen in "very racially isolated environments" (Cabrera). For these fraternity brothers who participated in this racially-charged video, their ever-

present echo chamber and the lack of alternate opinions in the room allowed for an environment in which this video could be recorded. This example goes to show how abrasive and invisible an echo chamber can be in modern day society. This is why it is so important to acknowledge the opinions around us, because, like a domino effect, the more times we break someone else's echo chamber the more likely someone else in the room will carry our message with them into the next echo chamber.

I'm not specifically talking to the student population or the prison population, but the citizens of American society as a whole, as an outcry to acknowledge that our voices mean something and how much power we hold to make a change when we use them. It must be a communal effort to break the walls of the racist, isolated echo chambers that are cryptically smoldering all around us. In this exponentially dividing country, it is our mission as citizens to listen to the language around us and to try to understand why people think the way they do to fully be able to fix the infectious ideologies in this country. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." Utilizing experiences such as mine with Brasil can and should inform our perspective on public discourse and allow for more nuanced viewpoints going forward. We can't let our fears trap us in, and trap equality out. We need to break free from our chambers of fear!

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# As I Say “Goodbye,” It is Time for You to Say “Hello”

Stephanie Perez

There are voices that are locked in metal cages, behind concrete walls, in places so far off the beaten path that nobody would ever come across them unless they were looking for them. These voices speak of knowledge and wisdom; they come from good men with strong characters, just like the well-dressed and clean-shaven men that you walk past on the street on your way to work, except these men have not walked the streets in years. These are our nation’s prisoners, all 2.3 million of them. 2.3 million voices are locked away and forgotten, but I have had the pleasure of getting to know one of the men that lives behind bars. In our letter exchanges, my partner, Bull, has expressed difficulties trying to feel like a good role model for his younger siblings while being in prison. He describes being silenced by people who believe that he is in no place to be giving other people advice as to how to live their lives, and yet those people have no idea the life-changing impact, for the good, that prison has had on Bull. Although Bull has already started to work past these difficulties, I was still shocked and outraged that people would shut Bull out simply because he is in prison. He has so much advice to give -- pages and pages of it! I implore you all, listen to Bull’s experiences that I relate below, listen to my struggles to work through Bull’s experiences, and then find it in your hearts to listen to one of the 2.3 million voices hidden behind the concrete walls that are crying to be heard.

In our letter exchange, Bull and I talked a lot about our relationships with our siblings since I have a very close connection with my twin sister. Things took a turn in one of our letters when this discussion turned from just casual, curious conversation to something far deeper. In one of his latest letters, Bull admitted to me that, being the eldest child in his family, he feels like a terrible example for his younger siblings because he is in prison, yet he still tries to motivate and advise his younger siblings as most older brothers do. He is happy that his younger brother (the second oldest in the family) still listens to him and looks up to him, but many people think that he should not. Bull writes, “I’ve been told by outsiders that ‘I have no right to tell my siblings or anyone else how to live their lives. Look at where I’m at.’”

Bull does not listen to these kinds of comments, however; after all, nobody on the outside can know what prison is really like, but Bull knows. He writes, “There

is a lot of knowledge behind these walls, great character, and overall just some good, normal people.” He then continues, “Of course if I knew then what I know now I’d be better off,” which is why he thinks it is so important to share what he has learned with his younger siblings. For Bull, “it is important to keep spreading that knowledge [that he has learned behind bars, demonstrate] leadership, and be a man.”

When I read Bull’s words, they touched my heart, and I hope they touch yours as well. Although I would never be able to understand exactly what Bull was feeling, I tried to imagine how I would feel if people I didn’t even know were telling me what I could or could not tell my siblings. Try that for a second: see if you can put yourself in that situation. Okay, now think about how you feel. When I did that, I immediately felt frustrated and extremely outraged. How can somebody, a random outsider, tell another person whether they have the right to give their younger siblings advice? It just seemed to me like nobody else’s business besides Bull’s and his siblings’.

But that isn’t the most important part of the moment that I selected, because anger and frustration aren’t going to give you a reason to listen to what Bull has to say. Bull’s statements about the amount of knowledge, good character, and normal people behind the prison walls and about the importance of spreading what he learned in prison, being a good leader, and being a man impacted me far more than anything else he had written up to then. I hope they impact you as well. I can’t describe what I felt upon first reading Bull’s words. I definitely felt inspired by the person he became on the inside -- maybe even a little proud of him for learning from the consequences of his actions and for using his horrible and traumatic situation to make himself a better man. I didn’t do anything to help him with this; Bull was already this “new man” by the time I got to know him, but through this letter exchange, I grew to care for Bull to a certain degree. And when you care about someone, you take pride in their accomplishments, big or small, and this is certainly a huge accomplishment for Bull. As our exchange is coming to an end, I can feel hopeful because of this moment in our exchange, hopeful that Bull is now on an upward climb out of the system and towards lifelong freedom and the happy life that he deserves. It definitely will make saying goodbye a whole lot easier for me, and I hope that it makes saying hello to someone like Bull easier for you, knowing that he or she, too, can one day see that first step and start climbing.

Obviously, I am the outlier here: one single person angry at what many “outsiders” find okay to do. And so, I started thinking about what made me different from all those outsiders. Granted, Bull never specified who exactly the outsiders were, but I saw them as people from the outside world who might be friends or

former acquaintances from college or work. In short, I saw them as people who at some point knew Bull, but now have a bad opinion of him because he is in prison. But why did they all automatically have a bad opinion of Bull? Does the fact that I have taken the time to get to know somebody behind bars make a difference in how I perceive prisoners as a whole?

Studies show that the answer is yes. Researchers at North Carolina University conducted a meta-analysis of existing research of public attitudes toward ex-offenders to see what variables had the most significant impacts on the public's attitude. They looked at 19 studies with a total of 9,355 participants and found that there are only three variables that significantly impact a person's attitude toward ex-offenders: political ideology of the person, whether the offender has a history of sexual offense, and interpersonal contact with offenders (Rade et al). This last one is the one I am going to highlight here, not only because this is why I think I had such a strong reaction to how the outsiders that Bull mentioned perceived him but because it is the only one of the three significant variables that can be easily changed. The study shows that those who reported no contact with a current or ex-offender reported more negative attitudes toward ex-offenders compared with members of the public that had reported any type of contact, whether face-to-face or otherwise, with current or ex-offenders (Rade et al). That is so significant: even just positive electronic contact with a prisoner, like I had, could be enough to change one's attitude toward ex-offenders. If those outsiders who tried to shut Bull up had decided instead to push aside their preconceived notions of him, sit down, and listen to what this man -- this human being -- had to say, then maybe their perceptions of Bull would have changed. It is a simple thing to do: instead of saying the first thing that pops into your head, just say "hello."

But really, you do not even have to say hello if you do not want to. Contact with a current or ex-offender can be just as simple as reading a personal essay written by someone who is now or was at some time incarcerated. Bull's words reminded me of the first piece of writing that we read in this class: Kemba Smith's letter. Smith was a 28-year-old woman (the same age as Bull) who was given a 24-year sentence for a drug possession crime. She penned a letter to *Emerge* magazine, pleading that the public change the way they perceive our nations' prisoners. She writes:

Please understand that I am twenty-eight years old and have seen and have seen and learned many things while being in the system. Understand that I am not criminally minded....that I love my people and that knowledge, maturity, and wisdom have shown me just how much.

Smith's words tell the same story and share the same message as Bull's, and I think that's why this whole situation makes me feel so outraged. It is not just one person who is being shut down by people who could not even imagine what they are going through, it is the whole population!

I believe I felt so inspired after reading Bull's letter because it reminded me of Smith's letter, which also left me feeling very motivated. After first reading Smith's letter, we wrote a response to it, and I immediately started writing about how excited I am that I'm in a perfect position to start seeing new changes in the criminal justice system. I wrote that college students are the future changemakers; it is college students who can give those that are incarcerated the hope that things will change because we will be the ones making that change. And I think that's why I'm writing to you, because, although us students can start change, we cannot be the only ones to execute the change. We all need to come together because change is not going to happen unless a majority of people are willing to hear and share the stories of our nation's 2.3 million prisoners.

Where do I go from here? Where do you? I talk of feeling outraged and inspired by Bull's words, but my conversation with him is soon ending. So how do I keep fighting the good fight? Last summer, I interned for a program that worked with juveniles in adult prison and in juvenile detention centers, and I think they may have had a program with adults at Everglades Correctional Institution, where Bull is being held. Maybe I can ask my supervisor and see if that program still exists so that I can help another prisoner share his story. That way, my reach can extend beyond juveniles, because the adults in prison still have a life to live. They need our help, too.

But to see real systemic change happen, I need to go beyond helping the individual, and that is why I am choosing to go to law school to practice criminal law. I want to understand the ins and outs of the system. It is like a machine. Once I understand how every part of it works and why it works the way it does, I can start taking it apart and putting it back together in the most effective way possible. It is a long road ahead, but experiences like my letter exchange with Bull help ignite the fire and the passion that I have. They motivate me to keep working towards change.

This essay might be your first positive contact with someone who is going through the criminal justice system (for I am writing to you all today on Bull's behalf), and I hope that it serves as the first match to start your fire for change. And I am sure you are wondering as I first did when I became aware of the seemingly insurmountable challenges ahead: how do we even begin? Start with something



simple. Read articles or books about the criminal justice system to learn more about how the system operates. My recommendation is to read a couple of chapters of *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander so that you can learn how mass incarceration came to be. Read memoirs, essays, poetry, or any other piece of writing written by a prisoner so that you can start to hear their voices. There is a website called The Prison Arts Coalition that has loads of published material written by prisoners from all around the country.

If you want to take it one step further, become a pen pal with a prisoner as I did. The program I did it with is called Exchange for Change, but I am not sure if they have opportunities for members of the community or if it is just for college students. Still, if you search up “prison pen pals” on Google, you will come up with tons of websites that connect you to people behind bars. Want to have face-to-face contact with people involved with the criminal justice system? There are plenty of organizations that do volunteer work in prisons or other institutions related to the justice system and that are always looking for more volunteers. The organization that I worked with in the summer is called Eradicating the School-to-Prison Pipeline, and I know that they are always looking for more helpers. Other volunteer opportunities that I know of include volunteering with Riverside House, a reentry facility for prisoners nearing the end of their sentence, and Transition, Inc., an organization where working professionals mentor offenders that are reentering the community. You might wonder how you can possibly start a conversation with someone whose life seems so drastically different from yours. Well, I will tell you, it starts with saying “Hello.”

*This is for those outsiders who tried to silence Bull.*

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# Reflection Paper

Olivia Dobrin

With a prompt asking for the specific silenced group you would lend your voice to, my partner “David Rhodes” and I took drastically different approaches. While my first letter centered on lending my voice to women, David Rhodes actually wrote about the exact opposite without even knowing what my answer to the prompt was. I explained to him that women are a silent and oppressed group, treated by some as second-class citizens — as weak, fragile, and emotional and thus having no business trying to become lawyers, doctors, politicians, and so on. I even added a personal story of how both my parents are academics in the same field of study yet my mother struggles far more in her consolidation of power and authority than my step-father. I had hoped that I offered a clear and concise answer to the question and that my partner would understand why I had picked women as my silenced group. However, David Rhodes believes this to be different.

In his introductory letter, David Rhodes first explains two groups that he would not lend his voice to: journalists and women. More specifically, he never exactly mentioned women’s rights, but rather a specific group/campaign for women’s rights: the #metoo movement. He starts by saying that there are “a lot of rotten apples in that basket” and that he questions the motives of the women, asking “why [they come] forward after all these years”. He explains that he thinks these women coming forward are related to a personal vendetta and have no backing. Specifically, he talks about Brett Kavanaugh, and how he doesn’t trust the women who have come forward. His doing so further justifies the idea that all men have made crude comments about women’s bodies, and that objectifying them is just a part of life — a “boys will be boys” mentality. When thinking about my goals for this exchange, I never really imagined having a partner whose views directly conflict with my own. I expected that we would agree to some extent on the issues we bring up and the topics we share. Even though I have found this to be very false, I still think it’s important that I am having these types of “hard” conversations with David Rhodes. My end goal of this exchange is to express how I feel and explain my opinions, which I have done. David Rhodes has done so as well. Having opposing opinions leads to exciting debates of ideas and opinions, and I look forward to further discussing topics in the same way.

With these goals in mind, when I first read David Rhodes’s response, I was shocked and dismayed by his ignorance. His words and his beliefs offended me

greatly, as someone who adamantly supports the #metoo movement. The letter I wrote to him, which he at the time had not received yet, was a direct opposition to what he argues. I was honestly unsure of how to go about responding to my partner. I wanted him to understand the severity of his words and explain to him why I didn't agree with his views, but in a way as to not offend him, or make it seem like I was pushing my views on him as well. With all this in mind, I wrote him a personal and emotional response to his letter, in hopes that he would respond well. I think the reason I was able to do so was that I believed so strongly in my own opinion. I personally don't understand why three women, if not more, would lie about these abuses in such a public manner. They made the active decision to forever be remembered for this movement for the rest of their lives. Everyone values their own personal legacy, and to be remembered as an accuser, despite all their accomplishments in life, is a decision that is difficult to make. The fact that my partner explains his view by arguing that the timing of their accusation was suspicious is not valid in the slightest. Many people who do not believe Dr. Ford, like my partner, find it hard to believe that people can get emotional in regards to this issue. I honestly find it hard not to get emotional on issues such as this in our current political climate.

I chose women as who I would lend my voice to not only because I am a woman, but because it is my own personal belief that we are not treated equally, as I have seen through personal experiences throughout my entire life. The very notion that a man like Kavanaugh could even be considered for such a highly esteemed position amid sexual assault allegations baffles me and upsets me. Even more so, it is so hard for me to deal with people, like David Rhodes, who just don't really see the "other side" of the story. I've dealt with people like this all my life, especially growing up in a conservative small town in Texas. I'm so used to having my feelings and beliefs put down, especially when it comes to politics. Speaking with David Rhodes about this issue almost brings me back to my childhood, where people exemplified everything that I thought was wrong. His opinions honestly feel like a slap in the face to all women, sexual assault survivors or not. It shows that the "men" in charge do not validate a woman's voice, and will not protect them in their time of need. Dr. Ford did not make her decision lightly, but she did so because she felt it was her civic duty to prevent a man such as Kavanaugh from attaining a position of such extreme power in our country. I found it almost hard to believe that my partner could think this, but after taking a step back, I can rationalize as to why he believes the things he does.

David Rhodes has been in the prison system for more than three decades. Any and all information that he receives is limited, unlike our ability to obtain any

and all information we want. In my opinion, the prison system has sheltered him in a way to where he is not open to all the media outlets because of lack of resources and lack of time, among other things. This further creates a system in which prisoners are not allocated the appropriate resources to form opinions on matters, such as sexual assault. David Rhodes is formulating opinions and ideas through the influences of male figures, with limited exposure to the “outside world,” which is far different from how we create our opinions outside of the prison walls. The criminals in the prison system are “marginalized from mainstream society...[that] will continue to create and maintain an enormous undercaste”(Alexander 96). Because of this, prisoners are not allocated the same resources and learning opportunities. This often creates a system of hierarchy that prisoners fall into, putting them into a category of second-class citizenship.

One cannot always completely blame the prisoners for their faults, such as my partner's lack of knowledge and understanding of sexual assault. Instead, one should take a closer look at the institution itself that closes several doors for those inside the prison system. This system allows men to remain unaware of current social issues, such as women's rights and sexual assault. The system further propagates inherent biases by not allowing prisoners to experience new ideas and theories, which is apparent in David Rhodes. In everyday life, almost everyone knows someone who has been affected by sexual assault, and it often times becomes a very personal issue. My partner hasn't had this experience, being locked away in prison and surrounded by men who most likely share the same lack of awareness. However, it is hard to tell whether or not that justifies his misogynistic words and beliefs. Can we truly blame him for his ignorance? Or should we blame the system of marginalization that the prison system creates inherently?

I think in the case of David Rhodes beliefs, there isn't one clear-cut answer on whether or not one thing or another is to blame. Clearly, my opinions and beliefs on this matter are slightly more biased, because of the experiences I have. My family has always instilled in me that every person is created equal and each person deserves equal opportunity. My mother, a strong proponent of equal rights, is a professor researching the ongoing problem of sexual assault in the workplace. After reading her research and hearing her tell the stories of these brave women, clearly my strong emotional response comes to light. Sexual assault on women is an ongoing problem that is not a recent phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, almost everyone has experienced themselves or have known people who have been sexually assaulted, and it is not an easy thing to deal with. The people I know who have gone through such horrible things are clearly affected by it. For someone to outwardly deny the rights of these women breaks my heart, which is why I take my partner's

words so personally. However, I haven't been locked away in prison for the last thirty years, surrounded by the same ideologies and opinions. There are many things to blame for David Rhodes's differing opinions, like his constant interaction with mainly male influences, the marginalization of prisons, and so on. I do think it is one's own experiences that lead to the creation of opinions, which is why I feel so strongly about this issue. My goals for the rest of this exchange are to constantly express my opinions and ideas, in hopes of teaching my partner what I believe and also working to understand his thought processes. Clearly, we have different backgrounds and views on several different topics, but I believe this won't hinder our conversations as we continue discussing important topics.

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# Halle Place Stories

*Halle Place, a supportive housing program located in West Palm Beach, is specifically designed for women who were formerly incarcerated within the prior six months. Most women who enter Halle Place are willing and ready to change their lives and accomplish things they never thought possible. The program includes career exploration, on-the-job training experiences, gender-responsive programming, substance abuse prevention, health and mental health support, financial literacy, life skills around healthy relationships and healthy living, family reunification, literacy and GED support, leadership curriculum, and conflict resolution. Each woman lives in an apartment-style home in order to successfully re-enter society with all the help and assistance Halle Place offers. Programs such as these are innovative and transformative for women who have lost everything. The environment is supportive, strict, and helpful. They have the opportunity to be exposed to women who have similar stories, fostering a sense of belonging that these women probably have not experienced before.*

*Our exchange program with Halle Place is centered on being a guiding force for these women. We serve as an outlet for the women to share their stories in a safe place. We hear about their experiences, insecurities, and worries and it is our goal to make them feel empowered and confident in their recovery process and re-entering into society. We hope to offer a sympathetic ear to their stories as a real person who respects them and their humanity. The director of the program, Val Stanley, explained to us that at first the women were far less receptive to writing these letters. But once they started the program, each woman found joy in sharing their stories and being valued as individuals, rather than being defined by their circumstances.*

*Six students participated in the letter exchange with Halle Place. These are their thoughts and takeaways from the experience.*



## **Morgan:**

*“It’s been a long hard journey, but I still press forward each and every day and if I did it then it’s possible for everyone.” -Heather*

*“My life is now full of meaning and it gives me a challenge every day to be the best at everything I do.” -Heather*

My partner’s name was Heather. Heather is an inspirational and extremely strong woman who has been through a lot in her life. In her first letter to me, she described her traumatic childhood abuse, which included being molested by her biological father since the age of five, being prostituted by her own mother to her mother’s boyfriends, and being raped by one of her mother’s boyfriends at the age of thirteen while her mother was sleeping next to her in the same bed. She began using drugs at a very young age to escape the pain and confusion she was feeling and became addicted to heroin. Because of this, she was incarcerated for six and a half years, where she had to deal with both detoxing and confronting her trauma head on, instead of using drugs to forget, all on her own. In her subsequent letters, Heather described how difficult this was for her, and how thankful she is for Halle Place where she is now able to attend trauma management classes and discover who she is and how valuable her life is.

## **Sabrina:**

My partner is VanNetta Smart. She has endured a lot of hard things in her life, so she feels very lucky to be at Halle Place. She strongly believes in God and her faith helped her to face the difficulties she has come across in her life. She is very thoughtful and has a strong concern for animals. She really would like to be able to make things move. She is an optimistic and inspiring woman.

## Andrea:

*“Although everything we’ve been through made stronger and has made me who I am today.” –Jay Sunshine*



*To Andrea P.M.*  
*By Jimmy Green*

*“Follow your dreams, you can be whoever you want to be. You are beautiful, you are smart, you are creative.” – Jay Sunshine*

*“Turn your dreams into reality, babygirl!” – Jay Sunshine*

On this Halle Place exchange, I had two partners. Their names were Jay Sunshine and Dory! Jay Sunshine was the type of person who no matter the situation, always sees the bright side of things. Sunshine’s story is sad. She was an addict and a homeless woman before she was introduced to Halle Place. Plus, during

those hard times, she lost a close loved one. She put a lot of pain on herself and to her family, and now that she is older and wiser, she is able to understand what she did on those days that led her to addiction and homelessness was worthless. She is a dreamer and she likes to follow her dreams and make them happen. She will encourage you to become whatever you want. She will remind you how beautiful you are and that you are capable of anything.

*“I would stay up for days and did whatever I had to do to get high, I thought the drugs were taking away my pain.” –Dory*

*“Now I know that I don’t need drugs to be happy” – Dory*

*“Here, I feel like a new woman” - Dory*

My second partner was Dory. Dory went through a really rough path at one time in her life. She grew up in a broken family, where her mom and dad argued a lot. She was beaten up so hard that she tells me that she had to shower to wash off the blood. Her father was never supportive. He told Dory since she was a kid that she was never going to be anybody, that she will be the first one of the family to get pregnant, and other things that hurt Dory deeply. When she was 14, she started hanging out with the wrong group of people, where she became a cocaine/crack addict, and in time, she became homeless. When that happened, her family did not want anything to do with her. The good part of this story is that she is grateful for this program of Halle Place, where she is starting a new life and she is becoming to be proud of herself.

## **Olivia:**

*“It’s people who put themselves in a box that ultimately fail because they do one or the other”- Precious Delaney*

*“I was always thinking about me and about what I could get. I never stopped to think what about society”-Precious Delaney*

*“I would like to live a life that is fulfilling to myself and focus on my happiness”- Precious Delaney*

My woman, Precious Delaney, has had a rough go in life. She details her early childhood years explaining that her parents abandoned her and her sister on the front door of her aunt and uncle's house. They were fortunate enough that they took her in and cared for her as if she was their own child. However, she underwent significant trauma being abandoned by her biological parents, and she began acting out as young as 14. She began associating with the “wrong crowd” and used drugs and sex as a coping mechanism. When she was 16, she got pregnant and in order to remain in the care of her aunt and uncle, she had to terminate the pregnancy, which

only furthered her erratic and irresponsible behavior. She then explains that from then until entering Halle Place, she continued with this behavior. She continued abusing drugs and sex, which ultimately led to her having three other children and, unfortunately HIV.

However, Precious Delaney has a mutant gene that basically means that she is living with HIV but exhibits no symptoms. It is almost as if she never had the disease in the first place. Now, Precious Delaney has three kids, is attempting to overcome her struggles, and hopes to mend her relationship with her family. She maintains such a positive, can-do attitude that is impressive for a woman who has been through so much. She constantly tells me how she is trying to turn her life around, and I truly believe she will. She serves as a great example of a someone who has lost everything, yet still manages to pull herself together. She is an inspiration to not only me but those who surround themselves with her presence.

## **Molly:**

*“Today I live in a women empowerment program. I am now building a better life and future for myself. I am gaining back my self-esteem. I also have learned to let go of the past. I am now finding my inner strength. I am surrounded by wonderful people who genuinely care about me. I know now that there is hope for me.” -Kimberly*

*“To all the women experiencing this kind of hardship, THERE IS HOPE. Never give up.” -Kimberly*

*“It actually feels so good to express myself to someone that does not know about my past. I don’t know why, but it just does.” -Kimberly*

*“Eventually, when things get better for me and I can get back on my feet, I want to advocate for women that are going through what I have been through. Not only to help them, but to help me.” -Kimberly*

*“I hope that my story can one day help another one’s distress.” -Kimberly*

*“Now that I am working on changing my life - which is not easy, I have become a stronger, more humble person. They say Rome was not built in a day. I am still building my city.” -Kimberly*

My Halle Place partner was Kimberly. She is a woman that has been through endless amounts of trauma but is extremely positive and looking forward to her second chance at life once she graduates Halle Place. She recalls her childhood as a time that was consumed by her mother being abused by her father before he went to prison. This was followed by her teenage years, in which she dealt with being raped by her father's friend at the age of 17. She spent the next decade dating very controlling men and getting married for the wrong reasons. After being sexually, physically, and mentally abused, Kimberly started using drugs to mask her pain. This eventually ended in her being homeless. Her story is not an easy one to digest, but the hope she has for her future is able to give those listening a happy ending. She visits her daughter and grandson every



*By Jimmy Green*

weekend she has free, and she is looking forward to making amends with her brothers and mother once she is completely back on her feet. She has a lot to look forward to, and she is slowly but surely building up her strength, confidence, and self-esteem with the help of the empowering women surrounding her.

## **Annette:**

*“Nobody wants to hear about AA or recovery when they are still using. That’s a boundary I can’t cross. Yet, I love them. And I can only show leading by example.” - Jennifer*

*“I am safe, I am loved, and a friend today.” -Jennifer*

My partner’s name is Jennifer. Her journey started with a few beers and some weed. She taught me never to take addiction lightly. She was married, had kids, and, after being prescribed opiates, could not keep control. She lost everything, her husband, her kids, and she was in and out of jail. Without family support, she was still strong enough to go through with this amazing program and do what was best for her even though it wasn’t easy. She is thoughtful and sees the best in things despite her situation. Jennifer is so truly grateful for what she has and for the support she’s gotten at her Halle Place family. She is a ray of sunshine and a true inspiration. She’s growing into the best version of herself through tireless efforts and hard work every day.

*This exchange it has been a wonderful and eye-opening experience for all of us. It put us in a position to speak to women who have had far different lives than ourselves, which was something we might not have had the chance to do. Each woman in Halle Place is special. They come from different backgrounds and all have different stories to share. Some of these women have seen and experienced things that we cannot even begin to comprehend. Yet, they all maintained such a positive attitude towards their recovery in Halle Place. While we hope that they might have been able to learn something from us, I think it is far clearer that we learned quite a bit from them. They far exceeded the goals we set in this project and this exchange is not something we would change for the world. These women are an inspirational story of recovery, resilience, and hope.*