

Free Minds

Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop is the only organization of its kind in Washington, D.C, and, as far as we aware, the only program in the US for youth charged and incarcerated in the adult criminal justice system that follows them and provides services from the time of arrest throughout their incarceration and when they return home to the community. We use the vehicles of books and writing to enable our members to envision a future that does not end with early death or a cycle of incarceration. The youth we serve come from an environment that is saturated in extreme poverty and violence (both at home and on the street) where their identity is rooted in the criminal life-style—until they meet Free Minds.

Delonte, 19, a formerly-incarcerated member of Free Minds, wrote after returning home from federal prison: “Before I joined Free Minds my mind wasn't free, I always thought I was made for the streets and nothing else, until they got me to read books and write my first poems. They helped me open my eyes to bigger dreams and long term goals.” Delonte is now employed as a building maintenance engineer and looking to take college courses. Delonte’s personal transformation embodies our program model’s success.

Nationwide, 90% of youth charged as adults will return to jail or prison within one year of their release; Free Minds’ current rate of recidivism is 31%.

We will use RMYF funding to support all three phases of our program which is completely member-driven. A popular Book Club selection is Nathan McCall’s *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, the true story of a man who overcame violence and poverty to become a successful author. Our members can relate to this story, which makes them believe that they too can break free from the streets. While in federal prison, a constant stream of communication (books, letters, cards, newsletter, etc) strengthens the bond between Free Minds staff and members scattered throughout the country [due to D.C.’s lack of a state prison]. This support prepares them for their release, where we connect them to a broader community of writers and readers, who are more willing to accept our members post-incarceration.

The final stage is providing them with the skills and resources necessary to obtain jobs and pursue their education. As part of our Reentry Support phase, our members lead a violence prevention initiative in which they share their own poetry and life experiences to educate the community and model positive behavior for at-risk youth.

All of these phases build a sense of belonging and identity as a Free Minds member which gives them the self-esteem to reject violence and write new chapters in their lives.

Our program has been recognized by the National Book Foundation’s Innovations in Reading prize, and your funding will also help us develop a curriculum so that we can meet the needs of the many requests we receive to bring our program and expertise to prison facilities across the nation.