



Florida Literacy Coalition

E-Book

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS BY FLORIDA'S ADULT LEARNERS

PREFACE

This e-book was created in order to showcase the work of South Bay Correctional and Rehabilitation Facility students, and designed to give adult learners the opportunity to build confidence while also improving their reading, writing, and critical thinking skills.

The imagination and creativity of these students shine through in their writing, reflecting a range of perspectives and life experiences that are as diverse as the authors themselves. As always, the editorial committee has chosen to minimize the editing of submissions, and therefore entries in the e- book appear largely as they were received.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Florida Literacy Coalition or any other affiliated organization. We congratulate the authors who contributed to this year's online publication and hope you enjoy reading and learning about their journeys.



A LIFE NEVER STARTED

Do you know the exact date you are going to die? I did, on November 28th, 2023. How did I know I was going to die on that date? I was going to commit suicide.

Why?

I was incarcerated at the age of 14 for murder. I was given a life sentence, and I lost my appeal. I failed to file anything to further the appeal process, and became time-barred in the courts; this effectively cut off all light at the end of my tunnel. If I'm being honest, I did this on purpose. I felt I deserved to be in prison. I had many dark years ahead of me. Dark years during which I lost all hope in everything and contemplated suicide constantly. I even attempted it in 2004 at the age of 20. I decided I was only going to do 25 years in prison: I would kill myself the day after my 40th birthday, November 28, 2023. I was not going to spend my entire life in prison.

Have you noticed the past tense yet?

What changed my mind? *Miller vs. Alabama*. A law change makes it unconstitutional for a juvenile to receive a mandatory life sentence. This law changed everything for me, including the way I think and act. After 18 years, I was back in court for a hearing to determine if life applied in my case. I was nervous, and, to be honest, scared, that I would still have life after the hearing. I had worried needlessly because the hearing never happened. I was offered a plea bargain and then resentenced to 40 years. For the first time since I was 14, I had a light at the end of my tunnel. I once again had hope.

To some, 40 years might seem like the end of their lives, but for me, it was the beginning of a new one. But wait! There's more! I have another hearing in October of 2022 to determine if I am fit to re-enter society, and, Lord willing, I could very well be released before the date I once planned to kill myself on.

Either way, I have hope again. I had a chance to start life, but due to my own bad decisions; I was never able to start. I am no longer resigned to the fact that I am going to die in prison at the age of 40 by my own hand. I have hope, and I will never lose it again. And I encourage everyone, in prison or out, regardless of what you are going through, to never give up either.

Mark Louis Dufault is a student at the South Bay Correctional and Rehabilitation Facility. His teacher is Cheralee Morgan.

THE RESILIENCE OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

I did not grow up surrounded by shattered glass or the tragic air that permeated the hoods of New York City. No, I was raised where the warmth and security of two loving parents encircled my very existence. They did everything in their power to provide their prince with luxuries and a promising future. But like the story of the Prince and the Prayer, I was drawn to the allure of the streets that would satisfy the void that resided within the very depths of my being.

I descended into an abyss full of drugs, alcohol, promiscuity and violence. The entire time I was telling myself that I was the captain of my ship but truth be told I was still hollow within and my family and those who dared to love me were the only ones who suffered for my misdeeds. Living fast and recklessly, I squandered many opportunities to be the success I was destined to be. I spent so much of my youth in and out of prison, repeatedly paying for my bad choices. I rationalized within that that these incarcerations were badges of honor that would add to my so-called "Street Cred". Despite it all, I still continued with an inner struggle because there was a deep-seated knowledge that this was not the life I was created to live, but the chokehold of darkness was too strong. I never imagined that my life would end up this way, but I found myself once again locked up in a cell one night, with nothing but my thoughts to keep me company.

That's when I noticed something etched into the ceiling, the word "Pray." It was as if the universe was giving me the key to unlock the greatness within. And it was upon putting that one word into practice that something miraculous happened. Mentors and leaders started to appear in my life as beacons of guidance. They began to hammer and chisel the rough edges and instill in me the principles of integrity, purpose and responsibility. They showed me that I didn't have to be defined by my past and that I could choose a productive path. I was skeptical at first, but as I spent more time with these wise should the eyes of my understanding were divinely illuminated.

The journey of becoming my higher self has not been easy but it has been well worth it. I am grateful for the spiritual senseis who have groomed me along the path of enlightenment and for the opportunities I have had to help others develop their gifts and talents by unlocking their full potential.

I may have fallen into the abyss but I have emerged stronger, wiser and with my purpose clearly defined. So allow my story, my testament to the power of transformation and the resilience of the human spirit encourage you to never give up becoming the best you!

Juan DeSantiago is a student at the South Bay Correctional and Rehabilitation Facility. His teacher is Cheralee Morgan.

A REFUND FOR YOUR MISERY

I'll see you on the other side
I wish this world was kinder to you and your demons were exorcised.

The darkness is ever-present,
and it's for real.
It will chew you up and spit you out.

If I could turn back the clock,
I would pay better attention and allow the light to filter into your life and permeate your thoughts.

I miss you, man.
More than you will ever know.

I wish I had known your pain was real. I wish I was a better human being then.
Someone who could feel.

In my pocket, I still have, the two coins I would place on your eyes for the ferryman
while you journey to the other side.

Heroin is a helluva drug.
My brother, my friend,
if the fates allowed, and it was within, and power to do so,
I would gladly refund your misery.

Michael AmRhein is a student at the South Bay Correctional and Rehabilitation Facility. His teacher is Cheralee Morgan.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AMERICAN

During the Civics Education Enrichment course, conducted at the prison, I was required to read: The 5000 Year Leap, by W. Cleon Skousen (2006).

The assignment was to submit an essay on "What it means to be an American?"

Skousen's emphasis is upon the United States Constitution, our unalienable human rights endowed to us by the Creator and the principles and duties that those rights entail. According to Skousen, in 1607, the first permanent colony of England called Jamestown (known as Virginia) is not only the setting for the book but also the beginning foundation for the structured framework of a new civilization known collectively as the United States of America.

The original settlers existed on a sow and reap living, not much differently, one might say, than all humanity for the prior 50 centuries (5,000) years. Very crudely, no indoor plumbing, hand tools, such as axes, hoes, and animal-driven carts and plows. However, with the sense of freedom (independence) from the "crown of England," the Jamestown Society began to thrive and advance; creating the "first popular assembly of the legislative representatives in the western hemisphere" (ibid pp 1-2).

In fact, Jamestown (Virginia) produced many of the founding fathers and four of the first five presidents (ib pp2-3).

According to Skousen, this American independence and free enterprise produced many phenomenal results. Yes, the massive melting pot of immigrants, collectively known today as the United States of America, produced an unfathomable leap (5,000 years in 200 years) in technical, political and economic achievement.

Freedom (independence) to think and act for one's self-produced unimaginable resources and discoveries such as the combustion engine, jet propulsion, nuclear energy and space travel.

To me, the basis or foundation of being an American is having a belief, idea and faith (ecological, theological and physiological) that this present society will progressively get better. I personally feel that as an American, I should believe in the Creator and in the principles laid out in the Constitution of the United States of America. The founding fathers knew, practiced and firmly stood by the self-evident and unalienable rights bestowed to all humanity by our Creator.

Richard J. Egbert is a student at the South Bay Correctional and Rehabilitation Facility. His teacher is Cheralee Morgan.

NO KID OF MINE

In St. Johnsbury, Amanda Lee was watching MTV.
Ushered upstairs to knock boots with Kelley Sue.
Amanda Lee's eyes, so big and blue,
watched my every move.

Above Ball-Four Lounge, Kelley Sue showed up with Amanda Lee in her arms,
wet and shivering cold.
It resembled two bedraggled souls salvaged from the Frying Pan Shoals.
My heart was wretched clean from my chest.

A kid in a crib and a woman trying to make me dinner,
one, full of joyful gibberish,
while the other is full of ginger.

I did not hold her;
I did not change her;
I did not feed her;
I did not burp her;
I showed her no attention at all.
Unsure and aloof without a clue of what to do.

A live-in girlfriend, and her child,
that was not even mine.

One poked holes in my condoms
the other beat my pots and pans like tom-toms.

With eyes so bright, she said, "Daddy!"
Her mother threw a fit
and with a snit reminded me
that Amanda Lee
wasn't even my kid.

Amanda Lee was my sigh,
yet still, she was no kid of mine.

She kicked her mom and out of the bathroom so she could potty,
all on her own.

I felt such pride and joy,
it must have shown.
Her mother sharply reminded me,
"That ain't no kid of yours!"

'91 was coming to a thaw.
I got a frantic call.
Someone was trying to take her away!
I hurried on my way.

The authorities told me,
the safety of Amanda Lee was the priority.

I put this kid that was not even mine,
in the back seat of the social worker's ride.
I felt this was folly, but made sure she had her little dolly.

As the car pulled off and away
up stood Amanda Lee
and mouthed to me,
"I'm sorry, Daddy!"

That day, that moment,

I died. I wanted Kelley Sue out of my life.

It seemed a matter of fact,
Amanda Lee was not ever coming back.
In my heart, there was no home without this kid that I could not call my own.

I felt broken, and damned to the ninth.
I'd lost the kid, that wasn't even mine.

COVID paid a visit.

Born March 22nd.
Her last name was new,
her first name was even changed,
but her middle name remained and her birthdate matched too.

I saw her eyes and just knew.
I cried, I melted alone in my cell.

A piece of me broke this time it was the bad cameo.
Those eyes, so big and blue, found and renewed.
This kid, who was not even mine,
was now a grown woman and mother of two.

Once there stood,
no kid of mine,
now was a woman I surely admire.

I'd be satisfied if I was the recipient of that twinkle in her eye.
I was no daddy of hers, as much as she needed and sorely deserved.
Yet, she'll always be my Amanda Lee.

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