

GRAM TALK

ISSUE 1
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It's wrong to stereotype

By J. G.

Here I go again, stealing to help my family. It's a Friday night on July 23, 2023, and I'm out hanging around with the wrong crowd.

I ended up getting caught. Now, I'm sitting in a juvenile program at South Florida Youth Academy.

Why did some of us do the crime?

A lot of people feel like we steal because we're greedy or selfish. But in reality, that's not the case.

Most of us come here from broken homes or abuse or not having a family or some other tough situation. That can cause us to do some crazy things.

People tell us all the time that we're going to end up in prison. But we don't need that. We don't need hate. We need guidance and help, like more programs on top of the ones already here.

Some financial help for struggling families of the youth here also would help.

Don't judge us. Understand where we came from and lend a hand.



Journalism students watch a "60 Minutes" interview of Kevin Hart to learn questioning techniques.

My Take

By E. R.

My goals are to do better in life. I know everybody says the same thing. But I mean it.

Being in a juvenile facility is no place for kids. This is no place I would want my kids to come when I have them.

The only person that can get in my way of a better life is me. So that means it's up to me to work harder, have faith and not to give up. Everything is going to be OK.

I turned 15 in jail and I will turn 16 before I get out of here. It hurts, but I can't blame anybody. I put myself here, not my mom or dad.

I have little brothers and sisters who look up to me. I want to change for them.

When I get out, I'm going to get a job in construction or welding. I'm going to go to high school to learn to better myself for my future.

It's never too late to change.

Ms. Dana Robinson shares thoughtful advice

By X. M.

Q: How long have you worked with youth?

A: For about 10 years. The good thing about it is that I have a passion for kids. The bad thing is when you get a good connection and then you lose contact with them when they leave.

Q: How did you get a job as a youth specialist at SFYA?

A: I was referred by the assistant facility administrator, Mr. Terrence Williams. I used to work with him at a group home.

Q: What is your goal in this job?

A: To motivate kids to do the right thing.

Q: What's your best advice for the youth?

A: Always stay positive.

Q: Where did you grow up? Did you get into trouble as a kid?

A: I grew up in Hollywood, FL, and I did get into trouble once as a kid. I learned that I had to make better decisions.

Q: How do you do that?

A: Think before you react, because the outcome could follow you throughout your life.

Q: Where do you see yourself in three years?

A: I want to open up my own business, a salon. I want to have a few workers, like a hair stylist, makeup artist and a nail technician.



The first issue of this newspaper was written by the students in two Exchange for Change journalism classes that are taught by volunteer Henry Unger. Exchange for Change is a Miami nonprofit that conducts writing classes in adult prisons and juvenile facilities. Mr. Unger, a retired newspaper reporter, edited this paper. Ms. Elyse Bartelme, an Exchange for Change intern, did the layout and design.

WELCOME

Ms. Indiana Rivera stresses coping skills

By C. C.

Q: Who was an influential person in your life?

A: A teacher named Ms. Fernandez, because of her passion for teaching. I enjoyed learning while I was growing up, and that is the reason I pursued education as a career.

Q: Where are you from?

A: Nicaragua, which is in Central America.

Q: Why did you come here?

A: In the 1980s in Nicaragua, there was a lot of tension with the government. So, we feared for our freedom and safety. So, we came to America.

Q: Why did you choose to work here?

A: I thought it was time to make a shift in my career and did a job hunt. I wanted to challenge myself and get a job that motivated me as a teacher.

Q: What is your best advice for the youth?

A: The skills you learn here you can practice for a lifetime, like coping skills that deal with gaining support and encouragement. Also, it's important to realize how critical education is and to try to learn from adults who can mentor you.



Ms. Tiffany Needham says 'be your best self'

By D. V. and T. K.

Q: What motivated you to become a therapist?

A: I saw a movie about a kid wanting to be a therapist and thought it was a good idea.

Q: Where are you from?

A: From New Jersey to Pennsylvania to Broward County. I wanted to get away from the cold.

Q: How was it growing up as a kid? Did you get into trouble?

A: My upbringing was good. No, I did not get into trouble as a schoolgirl.

Q: How do you feel about this program?

A: I love it. I love working with the youth and seeing them go home.

Q: What motivates you to come to work every day?

A: Money, family and the youth.

Q: Do you have something inspirational to say to the youth?

A: Be your best self. We are all better than this.

Going deep with Ms. Jasmine Mastin

By D. K. and M. A.

Q: What motivated you to become a therapist?

A: The work I was doing on myself inspired me to share what I know about emotional freedom.

Q: What made you want to work with kids in the juvenile system?

A: It's not something that I consciously chose. I just fell into it. I'm happy it was part of my path. I get to learn so much from you all.

Q: Can you tell us a little about your background?

A: The past has been my teacher, and I'm happy that I can be in union with it. I'm not haunted with regret, embarrassment, hurt or shame. I am learning and growing, so I now see that my past is something to be grateful for.

Q: What school do you go to?

A: Southern University A&M. Go Jags!

Q: What's your best advice for kids in the system?

A: What I have learned is that you all need a lot of love. So, love yourself enough to walk away from a bad situation, even when you really want to stay. Truly believe that you can do good things in this world. Use your power for good. Take care of yourself. Be curious about your troubles. Leave self-criticism, hate and judgment at the door.

Q: What motivates you to keep working as a therapist when kids disrespect you?

A: I understand my mission through love and God. I allow myself to be hurt. But I take care of myself and provide me with whatever I need to come back grounded. I will talk with the kid and create boundaries. I recognize that anger and disrespect are related to how the youth has been hurt.

Q: What are your goals in life?

A: Whew, I have so many. What I will share is I desire to generate passive income for myself, and to live out my passions and desires to the fullest. To eat healthy and take care of my mind and body. To have bliss and joy and freedom.



Mr. Jabez Hayes can relate to the youth

By **B. G.** and **A. M.**

Q: Where are you from?

A: Miami.

Q: Did you get into trouble as a kid?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you think you understand us more because of that?

A: Yes, definitely.

Q: What made you want to work with us youths?

A: The money and to change lives. I felt ready to be here.



Q: During your training as a youth specialist, what important thing did you learn?

A: To take a youth's feelings into consideration when dealing with issues.

Q: While working on the floor, how do you know something is about to happen?

A: By watching body language.

Q: What is one of your goals while working here?

A: I would like to be promoted to a supervisory role.

Q: What is the one goal you would like the youth to achieve?

A: To go home prepared for a better future.

Mr. Herbert Waters selected as Employee of the Month

Mr. Herbert Waters, a youth specialist, was selected as the Employee of the Month for January.

The administration explained that Mr. Waters is consistent in his approach and discipline of the youth.

Also, he's generally the first one to assist when there's a code (incident) call, an administrator said, adding that he has a good rapport with the kids.

The award, Mr. Waters said, "makes me feel motivated for the good I try to do."



Mr. Waters receives the award from facility administrator, Mr. Mandela Matasu.

Mr. Henry Unger puts his journalism background to work

By B. W.

Q: How old are you and what did you do?

A: I'm 73 years old. I was a newspaper reporter and editor for about 33 years, including 25 years at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the big paper there.

Q: Why are you teaching here?

A: After I retired in 2015, I knew I wanted to volunteer somewhere. After moving from Atlanta to Miami, I found out about a nonprofit organization, Exchange for Change, which runs writing programs in adult prisons and juvenile facilities. So, I decided to teach journalism for the program, and have been doing that for about nine years.

Q: Why did you want to volunteer?

A: I've always believed in trying to spend the limited time I have on this planet by doing meaningful things. I believe that teaching people critical skills – like how to write clearly and directly, and how to interview people and gather information – can help them throughout their entire lives.

Younger people, whether or not they ever become journalists, will face many interviews in their lives – about programs, schools, jobs and other things. If they know how to interview someone, then they will be very well-prepared when they are going to be interviewed. That is just one example of how journalism can help them.

Q: How do you think I did conducting this interview?

A: I think you did very well. You asked intelligent questions and took careful notes.

Ms. Andrea Ettienne opens up

By J. G. and B. B.

Q: What made you want to work in the system?

A: I wanted to try something new.

Q: When you were younger, did you ever get into trouble?

A: Yes. I got into a fight.

Q: Where are you from? Is it violent there?

A: I from Queens, N.Y. No, it's not violent.

Q: What's your dream job?

A: To work for myself, owning my own company.

Q: If you could travel anywhere, where would you go?

A: Africa.

Q: What kind of music do you like?

A: Rap and R&B.



Good Day / Bad Day

By E. A. and B. J.

Herbert Waters (youth specialist): A good day is when there are no problems, no talking back, when everybody is being respectful and the day runs smoothly.

Waters: A bad day is when we have to do a lot of disciplining, deal with a lot of problems, and there are disrespectful attitudes.

Student D. S.: A good day is when we get good food and everyone is chilling. It's when they give us fun stuff to do, like watching movies and hanging out.

Student D. W.: A bad day is waking up and doing the same thing over and over. It's when it's boring and there's nothing to do. It's seeing the same people every day.

Student B. M.: Times can get hard if you let it. If you keep a strong mind and demeanor, you will get through each day.

The Brave One

By B. J.

Dog: Hey little cat.

Cat: What do you want?

Dog: I want some of them treats our owner has up there. (He points to the countertop.)

Cat: She just gave us some before she left. You're greedy.

Dog: I'm just bigger than you. I'm not greedy.

Cat: Well, you can go up there.

Dog: That's why I called you, duh.

Cat: So, you want me to jump on the counter and knock the treats down?

Dog: Yes.

Cat: Duffy, I'm going to be the blame, so I get the most.

Dog: OK.

Cat: We are not eating them all.

Dog: She has so many. Why can't we eat them all?

Cat: You have a bowl full of food. Why do you want to eat all them treats?

Dog: Can you just jump up there, please?

Cat: OK, stand back. (The cat jumps on the counter.)

Dog: Oh yeah, game on!

Cat: We must hurry up before she gets back.

Dog: We have time.

Cat: No, we don't. She has a break early today. I heard her on the phone.

Dog: Good listening, pal.

Cat: Woah, back up. You're eating too much.

Dog: I'm sorry. I was hungry.

Cat: Let's go outside.

Dog: OK.

(Later that night)

Cat: I hear a car.

Dog: Let's go in so we can get ready for dinner.

Cat: Sounds like a plan. Finally, you're saying something smart.

Dog: Don't try being funny. I always say smart things.

Cat: If it's not about food, you don't talk about it.

Dog: Just go to your bed. She's opening the door.

Owner as she enters: Where are my babies?

Dog: Ruff, ruff.

Cat: Meow, meow.

Owner: Hey babies, how was your day?

Dog: Why does she call us babies? We are big.

Cat: Because we are little animals.

Dog: I wonder if they know we talk to each other.

Cat: No, they would kick us out if they heard us having a conversation.

Dog: I'm glad they don't understand us.

Cat: Let's go play in the toy room.

Dog: Good idea.

(They walk to the toy room and the cat jumps on top of the dresser.)

Dog: Throw down my toy.

Cat: Which one? There's a couple up here.

Dog: The toy I always have.

Cat: That toy is so old and wet.

Dog: So, it's not yours, it's mine. So, pass it down.

(The cat knocks down the toy.)

Dog: Thanks.

Cat: No problem.

(The next morning.)

Cat: Can you please stop chewing so hard?

Dog: You can't hear me. I'm on the other side of the room.

Cat: Yes, I can. You sound like a rat.

Dog: I promise that's not me. I stopped chewing long ago.

Cat: So, what's that sound?

Dog: It sounds like it's coming from under the dresser. You go look.

Cat: I don't think I want to go under the dresser.

Dog: You must be brave. I always have to do things.

Cat: So, I must be the brave one.

Dog: Yes.

Cat: I'm used to jumping up, but not going under stuff.

Dog: Just be brave. It's going to be OK.

Cat: Just this one time. Never again.

Dog: OK. Just remember to be brave.

(The cat went under the dresser to see what the noise was. As she went under, it got darker the deeper she went.)

Cat: It's getting very dark.

Dog: Just keep going.

Cat: Meow, there's a rat under here.

Dog: What?

Cat: A rat.

(The cat ran out from under the dresser.)

Dog: You're a cat. Why are you running?

Cat: What? You're bigger. Go get it.

Dog: I can't get under there. Just be brave.

(The cat went back under the dresser.)

Cat: Meow, meow, meow, meow!

Dog: Get it! Get it!

(The cat was fighting with the rat under the dresser. Then, the rat ran out from under the dresser and the dog grabbed it, biting very hard.)

Cat: You got him. You did it.

Dog: No, you did it. You're the one who went under the dresser to get it.

Cat: Yeah, but if you were not here, it would have gotten away.

Dog: We did it together, thanks to you.

Cat: Yeah, we did it.

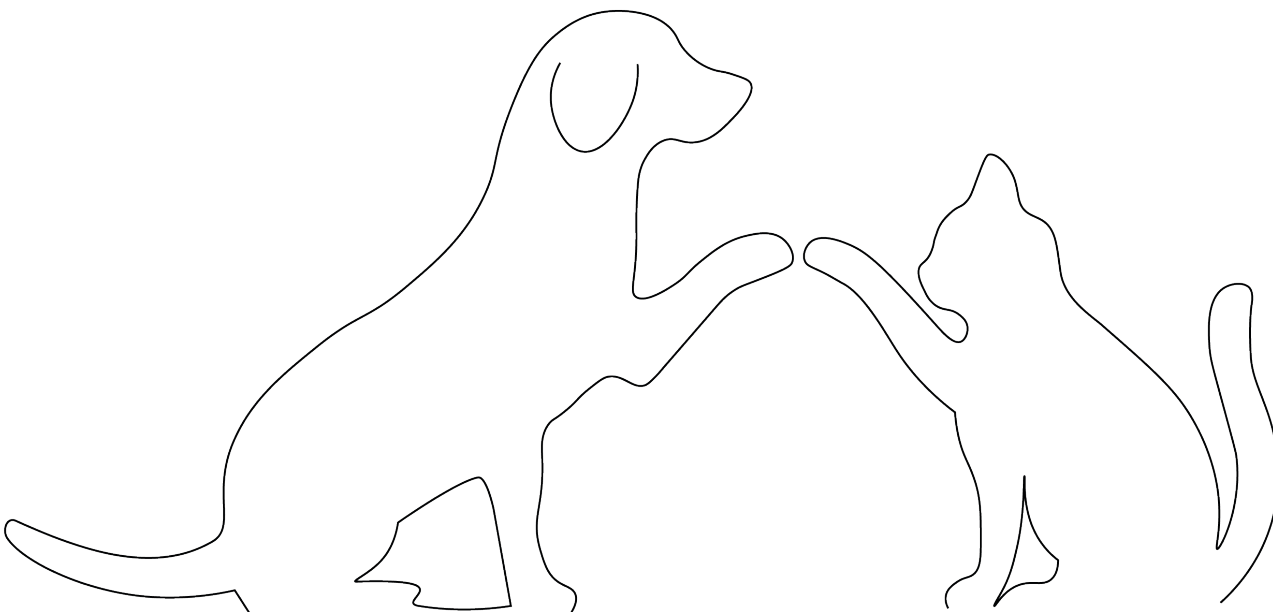
Dog: Mom's going to be happy we got it.

Cat: Mom has gone out of town. She won't be back until next week.

Dog: See, you never tell me anything.

Cat: Well, let's go get some treats.

Dog: Good plan.



From San Quentin

What's Up?

My name is Sam and I'm 34 years old. I've been in prison since I was 18. I was sentenced to 159 years to life.

I was raised by a single mother. I have a brother who's four years younger than I am and a sister who's two years older. When I was 9, my mom went to prison, so my siblings and I ended up in foster homes. We got split up.

To keep it solid with y'all, I went through a lot of shit during that time in my life. I never really knew how it affected me, because for most of my life I was taught to not express my feelings or what I was going through.

Expressing your feelings is normal and doesn't make you weak. If you are dealing with something and you continue to hold it in, how can it ever be fixed? You need to tell your bro or somebody you trust that you are hurting.

Growing up, I always knew I needed money to survive. I did everything, from selling candy and washing cars, to running in houses and robbing everybody at gunpoint. I had no respect for the law since I was a kid.

If y'all look around your building, you will see a bunch of young men who grew up with the same struggles you did. That means that they may be feeling the same pain you do. But because they may be from another hood, so you hate them.

Ask yourself, where and when did that funk start? We all are a product of the same struggle and pain. But we fight and compete and we call that "winning."

When we come to jail, we leave our kids out there to grow up in that same cycle. We leave our mothers and women alone to take care of themselves and get mad when they don't come to visit us. We don't realize that we left them hurting and struggling.

It's time to wake up and reprogram ourselves. I know that's easier said than done. But there are people and resources in your program. Take advantage of them. They can help you LIVE, instead of just survive.

We may have never met, but I know most of us come from the same struggle, so I have love for y'all. I know you can beat the odds. The fact that you are reading this letter is the start of the conversation for change.

Hold your face up to the sky and keep learning!

It's love ...

Sam Nichols

Student Replies

Dear Sam,

As you know, I'm in a juvenile program. I've read your letter and I can't say that I understand your pain completely, but I understand some of it.

I started doing illegal drugs when I turned 14, but I didn't get arrested until I was 17. My life wasn't cupcakes and rainbows either. I'm a big, tall African-American, so the odds growing up were against me. I got committed for grand theft auto, burglary and fraudulent use of credit cards. I did all these things for money. My momma stopped getting me what I wanted because I was getting in trouble at school a lot. So, I started doing things on my own.

My father was rarely in my life. He only came around when I got in trouble.

I have some homeboys that are deceased. I hate to admit it, but they are better off there than on earth.

I am 18 and I am supposed to get released soon. I am the father of two twins and wasn't able to see them or hold them because I had to do 13 months.

My eyes have opened to the world. Thank God for giving me a second chance.

I want you to write me back. I will do everything I can to help you keep your head up during your sentence.

Sincerely,

K. W.

Wassup Big Bro?

I read your letter. Kind of feeling some connection. I'm 17 years old right now. I'm feeling like I'm failing in life.

I've been in and out of jail. It's been a year since I'm here, battling with pain and grief.

How do you manage to cope? Is prison life as rough as they say it is?

Although it's not completely his fault, I feel most of my problems came up when my pops got sent to prison for the second time. My mom moved to a city a couple of hours away, leaving me with my aunt.

Stuck in the city on an ankle monitor made me turn towards the streets, looking for some way of

coping. I followed behind some older guys, and that got me deep in the streets.

Before I realized it, my name was one of the hottest in my city. I thought it was a good thing to have the attention I always wanted. The police started to have eyes on me and my whole hood. That put us all in hard situations. We all ended up with shooting/gun charges. It got us labeled as gang members.

How can I shake that? What's some advice or knowledge that you can give me?

I appreciate your help!

Sincerely,

J. Z.

From San Quentin

My Young Brothers,

I hope this letter reaches you in the very moment you needed to hear these words.

I know what it feels like to be lost, hurt, lied to, manipulated, or caught up in the gang life and coming home to a broken family.

I had to face life's most fearful lesson besides death, and that is life in prison. But I didn't come to prison as a youth. There was a buildup that led me to serving a life sentence.

I first started selling drugs at 12 years old, trying to keep up with the current fashion at school because my mom didn't have enough money to get me things I wanted. My father wasn't around to help us out. I was caught after a few months, selling crack cocaine. I was placed in juvenile hall for a few weeks and released on probation.

Ever since I landed on probation, I couldn't stay out of jail. Two years later, I went back to juvenile hall for assault. I was sentenced to six months in a camp program.

I had many fights with guys I didn't like because of their gang affiliations or the way they talked. I was jumped in the laundry room and sucker-punched in class, resulting in a broken nose and black eye. I felt embarrassed. I kept telling myself I can't go out like this, making myself emotionally unstable. I just wanted revenge, no matter how it came. I had to bottle up all my emotions inside and take them home with me when I was released six months later.

I came out 20 pounds heavier, which made my ego skyrocket. I felt that people respected me more now because I had bigger arms, and my chest was poking out further. But my ego and I didn't last five months after my release. Poor choices and unresolved childhood trauma drove me into a dark

place. At age 15, I was arrested for first-degree murder and two attempted murders.

About two years later, I was convicted on all counts and sentenced to 50 years to life in prison. I'm now 31 years old and have been incarcerated for 15 years now. Today, I'm still fighting to get out prison. I always thought it wouldn't be me. I'm from the streets. Little did I know incarceration doesn't discriminate.

Man, I sure wish I could go back in time when I was in juvenile hall. I would go and ask for help from my counselor and psychiatrist. I would let them know I'm struggling to find my purpose.

People are placed in your life for a reason. A lot of time, we don't know why until we start asking questions. But too often we are afraid to ask for help when we really need it.

I want you to know it's OK to ask for help. If you're rejected by one person, ask someone else. I'm sure you'll get a different response.

Thank you for reading my letter. I hope to hear back from you with any questions.

Respectfully your friend,

Eric Allen

Student Replies

Dear Mr. Allen,

I read your letter. I'm happy to tell you that it did reach me at a hard time. I've been struggling with my depression.

The first time I went to jail was also when I was 12. I went in for battery. I got 21 days.

After I got out, I was hanging with the homies. We wanted to go to the beach and people wouldn't take us. So, we walked to the closest gas station and stole a car. We found meth and money in it. Then we got caught by the cops.

I went in thinking I was going to do another 21 days, but I was wrong. They sent me to an unsecure juvenile program. I ran, got caught and was then sent to a secure juvenile program. I got stuck in the system for two years.

After I was released, I met and broke up with a girl, got depressed and ended up getting addicted. My probation officer arranged a drug test, and I was arrested again. Now, I'm in another program.

I'm 18, trying to get home for my girl and her kids. Do you have any kids?

How is it in prison? My dad told me stories.

Keep your head up. Tell me about you and how you're doing when you write back.

Sincerely,

D. K.

Dear Brother Eric Allen,

I'm 16 and I've been locked up for 18 months. I'm a repeat offender. I did a robbery and committed grand theft. I was trying to help my mom pay the bills.

I was 11 when me and my mom started getting abused. I started smoking and stealing. I can relate to poverty and hard times.

I want to change my life and get a degree in psychology. My mom is doing better now, so I think I'll be able to stay out of the streets and make legal money.

I'm becoming more spiritual.

I appreciate your letter. It means a lot. I sit in my room, praying to get out and be safe.

I will pray for you. I understand somewhat how it feels to be locked up.

In your next letter, can you give me some advice? Can you tell me more about prison?

Sincerely,

J. G.

Dear Brother Eric Allen,

Thank you for writing this letter. I would like to ask you for your help and advice.

I am 17 and have been locked up for 17 months. I got trapped in the wrong crowd, just because I felt that they cared.

I grew up without a father and my mom was always working to keep a roof over my head.

All I wanted was love and comfort, and the only way I thought I could get it was by being somebody I'm not. So, I started hanging with people I thought cared, which led me to do whatever to keep them by my side.

Now, I sit here in this program, trying to change. But it's not easy.

I lost my brother two months ago and I couldn't even say goodbye. I've been depressed. But I don't show it, because I don't want people to worry about me.

I'm an emotional person and I feel as if people don't care. I sit in my room and ask myself what do I have to do for someone to make sure I'm OK or make it feel like I exist?

I want to go home and help my mom.

I hope you stay safe.

Sincerely,

D.V.