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# Tell Me a Story: Bridging the Gap Between University of Richmond Students and Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center Residents

Sylvia Gale

*University of Richmond*, [sgale@richmond.edu](mailto:sgale@richmond.edu)

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# Tell Me A Story

Bridging the Gap Between  
University of Richmond Students and  
Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center Residents



# **Tell Me A Story**

Bridging the Gap Between University of Richmond  
Students and Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center  
Residents

Dear Reader,

We are sixteen University of Richmond students who registered for a class called *Storytelling and Social Change* in the second semester of our first year of college. Our class explores the ways that stories – particularly life narratives – contribute to a community’s shared or imposed sense of identity, and considers whether and how storytelling is a tool for social change.

As part of our class, we completed a Community Based Learning Project in which we worked with sixteen residents at Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center to build relationships through stories. The goals of our storytelling workshop were:

1. Build a healthy short-term peer-to-peer relationship as we use stories to bridge across differences.
2. Partner each Bon Air resident with a UR student and share stories in order to reflect on and understand our own lives in a new way.
3. Settle on one story prompt and write about ourselves in a way that can be shared with others and helps others understand us.

Most of the residents we partnered with at the Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center are involved in a program called “Career Pathways,” which is an educational and vocational training program that offers youth between the ages of 14-21 years old educational, career and placement services by engaging youth in individual and group mentoring, leadership, service-learning, and workforce development opportunities. It was through a series of

storytelling workshops, created by our class as part of the Pathways program, that we had the opportunity to exchange stories and gain a new perspective.

When we first entered Bon Air JCC, it was like nothing that we had ever experienced before. Here are some of our thoughts at the time, as captured in journal reflections we wrote:

“I am especially uncomfortable with opening up on a deep, personal level with someone who I have just met and who is imprisoned.” -O.W.

“I think there’s a sense of guilt that will accompany all of us as we view the facility – we can’t help but feel bad because we can’t imagine what it’s like to be in their place, or have gone through the hardships that they have.” -C.I.

“I hope he wants to talk to me. About real stuff. Not just surface things.” -A.S.

We visited the center on three different occasions for two hour sessions. Each time, we met in small groups before breaking off into pairs. As a group we had a short discussion, for example sharing about our day or telling stories about our favorite places. When we broke off into pairs, we asked our partners different story prompts and alternated in sharing stories. Each pair had a different experience and exhibited different levels of success with the prompts. Eventually, we all landed on a story that we wanted to share. It was up to each pair how to present the stories, side-by-side or intertwined. Finally, it was up to our class to create this booklet.

During our workshop, we focused on finding and telling stories more than perfecting them in written form. For that reason, we have chosen not to edit the stories significantly. Throughout the booklet, we also included short excerpts from our class's journal reflections about this storytelling experience. In addition, we included illustrations drawn by two of our classmates, Christine and Vi. The purpose of the illustrations is to place the partners together in the same space, just like the goal of our project. The title page was a collaboration between a Bon Air resident and a University of Richmond student.

We would like to thank Ashley Williams, as well as the staff of Pathways and the officers at Bon Air JCC, who supported this project and ensured that we would have a positive experience; without them, this exchange would not have been possible. As a class, we would like to thank Dr. Sylvia Gale and Miranda Rosenblum for guiding us and keeping our goals in sight throughout the project. We'd also like to acknowledge the University of Richmond Bonner Center for Civic Engagement for supporting our community based learning experience from start to finish. Finally, we would like to thank those who have pursued similar programs, such as Dave Coogan, for inspiring us to embark on this project.

The stories you are about to read are initialed for privacy reasons. They are also initialized to emphasize the stories themselves, rather than any preconceived notions about the writer. Something that we have learned through this experience is that all stories are equally important; the difference is who's listening to them.

April 2016  
Richmond, VA

*"I'd never met anyone who'd been to jail. I had no idea what to expect, I just hope my partner and I get along."*



## **“My Favorite Relationship”**

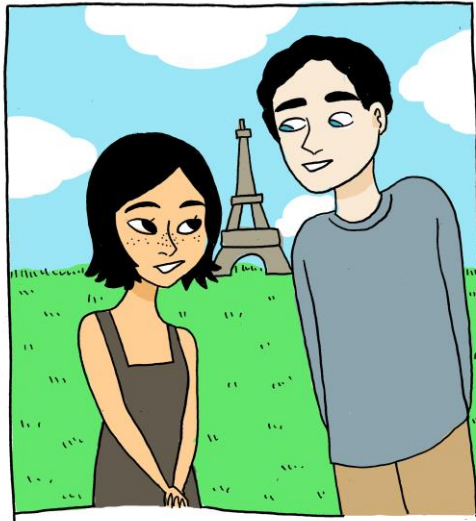
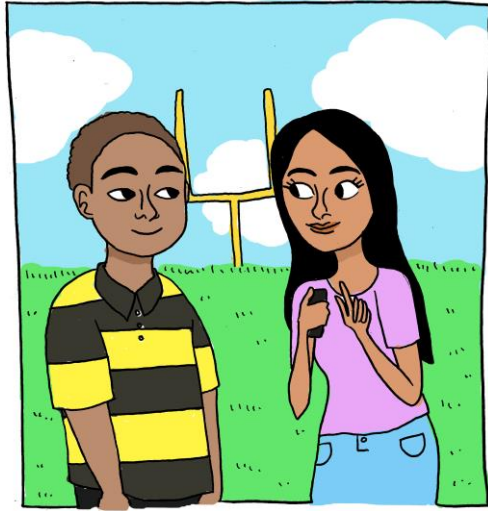
**S. F.**

One day me and my brother Shaun went to a Black vs. Broad Rock game. It was hot as hell outside. So we was sitting on a bench and I saw two girls. One of them caught my eye ASAP! So I asked my brother let's go talk to them. He said let's go. So as we was walking towards them they walked away towards a red truck and got in and left. I was so mad and curious at the same time. So 7 months later I had a party at a teenage club called Escape. Me and my friends was like 70 deep so after the party I had on some yellow and black 7's, some all black cut of True Religion jeans, and a yellow and black Ralph Lauren shirt. So we decided to walk to the restaurant called Chipotle. So when we get there I see a group of girls laughing and joking. So I knew a lot of them then I see a familiar face and it turn out to be the girl from the game, so I walked up to her while she was texting and asked what was her name. When she looked up it was like she saw a ghost. And then she said “OMG I remember you from the Blackwell game.” I said “Man its crazy because this some movie shit” then we laughed together and her name was Cherish. So she gave me her number. And I hugged her and for the rest of the night we talked and texted each other for hours.

**C.I.**

My parents grew up on opposite ends of the globe—my mother was raised in Japan while my father lived in the suburbs of Cincinnati, Ohio. In college, however, my father started studying Japanese, and he actually travelled to Japan to learn the language. To anyone who's never heard my story before, it's easy to assume that my parents met in Japan. But life works in mysterious ways, and my mother was actually in Paris studying French

at the time. She was still a student by the time my father decided to rent an apartment on the Rue de St. Germain, where he was staying. So there my parents were, two foreigners in Paris, a Japanese woman fluent in French and an American man fluent in Japanese. As fate would have it, another foreigner – a young woman from Chile named Pabla – decided to introduce them to each other. My father was late to the movie theater when they were first supposed to meet, and they didn't cross paths again until a party where they tried to communicate in only broken English or French, neither realizing that the other could speak Japanese fluently. So one day my father, finally tired of attempting his less than mediocre French, spoke to my mother in Japanese and she was at once startled and very, very shocked. It was just like a movie. So my parents talked and talked, and continued talking through writing letters when my father went home to the United States, and eventually they decided to get married.



*"I heard the beeping sound of an opening gate, but I also heard the sound of residents chatting and laughing."*

## **“Good Day Gone Bad”**

**A. T.**

At about 5:00 in the morning the staff woke us up and told us that we wasn't going to the dining hall, which was a good thing because we didn't have to walk all the way across the campus to eat a nasty breakfast and on top of that it be cold outside and I don't have a hat or gloves to protect me from the cold. So when they told us that it lightened my mood up. So I went back to sleep until about 7:00. I woke up and did my hygiene and my favorite song was on the radio. So I started turning up. Doing all types of dances. It woke me up and got my energy flowing. Then at like 7:45 when it was time to go to school my mood kinda dropped a little bit because I thought about my first period class and how boring it was about to be because my first period teacher don't do nothing exciting. All she do is talk and she has one of the most annoying voices I ever heard. I got to sit there and listen to her talk for a hour and 30 minutes. So I told myself that as soon as I got there I was going to go to sleep. But when I got there she wasn't even there. We had a substitute who didn't give us no work and didn't care what we did so basically we had a free day. When I got to second period my cosmetology teacher told me that I would finally be cutting somebody's hair. I been in that class for two months and that was my first time cutting a real person's hair. And I did a good job. After second period was over we went straight to lunch. When we got in the cafeteria 58 was in there which was a unit that we didn't like. I didn't really pay no attention to them. All I wanted to do was eat my lunch and go on with my day but that's not what the other people on my unit had in mind. Because the next thing I knew was that it was a big fight going on between my unit and 58. At first I wasn't going to jump in it but one of my closest friends was one of the

people who was fighting, so I hit the closest person to me that was in 58. After the fight was over everybody was escorted back to their rooms. We aint come out until Thursday morning. The only time we came out was to take a shower and use the bathroom.

### **“Someone Who Inspires Me: My Mother”**

**M. L.**

One person who inspires me a lot is my mom. My mom inspires me every day for many different reasons. And, although there are many people who inspire me, she sticks out in my mind for some reason. My mom inspires me because I respect her lifestyle, primarily. I respect her outlook on life, the way she views and deals with adversity, and the way she treats other people. I want to model my lifestyle after hers because I see the amazing way she lives each and every day.

My mom always respects other people. I frequently hear her say, “Just be kind.” I relate to this because I think the same way, most likely because my mother raised me. I believe this is an incredible lesson because the world would be a better place if everyone could just be kind to one another. I admire the fact that my mom is friendly to anyone she encounters.

However, my mom has also taught me a lot about respecting myself and having confidence. She has shown me the importance of confidence in this world and how insecurities can hold you back. Thanks to her, I have become a much stronger person. I try to have confidence just like she does because she has shown me how a lack of confidence can only hurt you.

Lastly, my mom inspires me because of her dedication to the people and things she loves. She works hard every day to better and take care of me and my brothers, my dog, and my home. She even works hard to fix our beach house, which was badly damaged by Hurricane Sandy. My mom goes to work to provide for us and make sure we are well taken care of, and I admire her for that.

*"I'm looking forward to reading his stories. It seems like he has a lot to say."*



## **“My Best Childhood Story”**

**E. H.**

When I was young running around with a running nose I used my age to get away with everything because I was like 10 so my mom always let me get away with everything. I always took her candy out her room and eat it. Then I blamed it on my older brother. It's funny because she took my word but one day he set me up he was like mom got some new candy I was like “oh foreal” I went upstairs to take some so I got it then put the trash where I always put it and he went to go get it and showed mom. She beat me for about a whole hour. I will never forget it. It taught me a lesson because it's karma. I kept getting my brother in trouble and then I turned around and got in trouble and I could've just asked for some... that's my best childhood story because it taught me a lesson...

**A. S.**

I shared a room with my sister until she moved out of our house when I was 17. For some reason our room would move around the house every few years. My family is extremely odd and disorganized and a lot of times things happen without making any sense. For example, one day when I was around 11, my sister and I moved out of our room downstairs and into my mom's closet. Yes. Her closet. To this day I cannot remember the reasoning behind that. I asked my sister and she responded, “Loaded question. You assume there *was* reasoning behind it.” Like I said my family was rather odd. There must have been open rooms around the house somewhere. Maybe my grandma was living with us at the time. All I know for sure is that for a year my sister and I were sharing the space of a small car for our bedroom. The ceiling was shorter than I am, which is saying something, so we weren't able to sit up on the two

stacked little mattresses we used as a bed without hitting our heads on the ceiling. The few square feet around the bed were used to store some of our things. The rest was in a room downstairs. Looking back on this is really weird. Now I can't believe I spent a year living like Harry Potter under the stairs, but at the time it didn't seem strange at all. I don't know if this is my best childhood story, but I chose it because it pretty perfectly describes the way I grew up: weird, illogical, funny, and utterly unique.



*“He told me he doesn’t usually see the guys smiling this much and to see them happy makes him happy, which really warmed my heart.”*

## **“Tell A Story About Your Favorite Place”**

**T. H.**

Another place I like to go which is every other day to chill is this place where my ma dukes stay around, but it's a little away from here, but it somewhere where we don't have to worry about nothing just think do stuff teens do and chill for hours. The area is like a little spot of concrete we park the car on. It has an opening where you can see a lot of sky at night during the day too but the woods make it more sweet and it's like always a cool breeze fresh air smell but it like where I go to let stuff drop or just think.

**L. M.**

I will always remember sitting in my backyard on warm summer evenings waiting for my dad to come home so we could go to my favorite place. Across the street from my house, there is a huge property owned by the church in our town. There's an abandoned mansion surrounded by huge open fields, and beyond the fields are miles of trails winding through the woods towards and around a lake. In the fall we would take our dogs on long walks through the woods, then go sit by the lake and look at the beautiful changing leaves. In the summer, however, the property was completely different. Wild raspberry bushes would pop up everywhere, and my whole family would go on trips to collect as many berries as we could. My dad also used to take me “snake hunting” in our free time. We never actually hunted snakes, but we would catch them, bring them back home, and release them in our backyard. I have so many fond memories of this property from the time we moved to Connecticut when I was four. When I was in high school, however, the church put the property up for sale. Someone was planning to buy the property to knock down

the mansion, bulldoze the woods, and build apartment buildings in place of the nature. My family, of course, fought against this. We helped the town and forest association to find someone else to buy this property and keep it the same as it has always been. Sure enough, after a few months of campaigning, raising money, and peaceful protesting, someone else bought the property. To this day, it continues to be the beautiful property with open fields, long trails, quiet woods, old mansions and barns, snakes, and raspberry bushes that I remember and adore from my childhood.



*“Each visit, the time seemed to pass by faster and faster.”*



**"I Am"**

**C. J. and O. W.**

I am **handsome**, *strong*, **strong willed** & *worried*

I wonder if **God is really real** & *about my future*

I hear **humming sounds**, *crashes and laughter*

I see **a lot of struggles** & *my reflection*

I want to **be wealthy one day** & *relax*

I am **handsome**, *strong*, **strong willed** & *worried*

*“I think it was coincidental that those similar attributes popped up first for both of us... I think it could mean we are both defensive so we need to immediately protect ourselves by noting our strength against an unmentioned something.”*

## **“Tell a Story About a Place You Are From...New Jersey!”**

**T. H. and C.M.**

It was three nights before I was headed down to Richmond, and it was my last party at home. All my friends were leaving later for college by a couple of weeks. I was by far the first one to go. Needless to say, I was very emotional that night.

Before the party, I went to one of my friends house where my best group of friends were hanging out before the party. We all jammed into a car and hit the road. When we got to the party, we couldn't have been more excited. It was awesome! I couldn't have asked for anything better. I had invited a group of girls to the party, but they weren't going to be able to come until later, so I enjoyed as much time as I could with my buddies.

Unfortunately, the host's parents had figured out that he was having a party, so they headed home.

Once we had received the news, everyone in the house began to clean and get out of the house. Everyone hung out in the driveway. As time went on, everyone got a different ride whether it was from an uber, parent, or taxi, and we all headed in our own directions. I was with my good buddy and two of the girls from the group that I had invited. We were headed to one of the girl's house to hangout and watch a movie. She had her own personal movie theater!

Once we got to the house, we went to the basement to watch the movie. It was late so the girl I was talking to over the summer and I fell asleep almost immediately.

We woke up at 4 a.m., and the movie was off. My friend and his girlfriend had already gone to bed. It was a huge house, so I assumed that there would be some extra bedrooms, but I had never been there before so I didn't

know where to go. I went upstairs and found a bedroom with a cracked door. I figured that this wouldn't be the parents' room. I thought that I would find my friend and his girlfriend sleeping in there. And, I was right! Or, at least I thought I was. I went to tap the blonde haired girl on the shoulder and I said, "Kristen, Kristen, wake up! Which room is your parents'?" I really didn't want to walk into the parents' room. I continued to think that I was talking to Kristen. I wasn't, however. I was talking to her older sister. They looked so similar.

At first she was very confused, but she was very helpful. She explained who she was exactly and she told me where her parents bedroom would be.

We all got a good laugh in the morning.

*January 2014 I went to Jersey to visit my Baby Mother at the time. My GrandMother was also sick so I tried to spend time with her. Also, I was Not Going to school at the time. Because I was still enrolled In school In Virginia. Me and My Mother was only supposed to stay for a week But I Refused to leave so I stayed & she left. Now I'm stuck at my aunt's house with few clothes & No Money. I started kickin It with my Baby Mother Everyday. I Got so Involved with Her I forgot all about My GrandMother. One day I Got a call telling me that she died. I went up to the Hospital to see her in person and most of my Relatives was there. My family never Got along, But this time they came together. My Mom called me and told me she was coming up there to my G-mother's funeral. The day of the funeral I asked my Baby Mother could she come & she agreed. When my mom came they met each other & my mom was unsure about the pregnancy because she looked so small In the stomach. We Got through the funeral & went to the Burial site. I met my Brother there & he questioned the baby too. Its finally starting to click In my head that this Girl was not pregnant & was clearly faking. I stayed around just In case. My mother agreed to let me stay in Jersey 4 two more weeks. I did that and finally Came home. The*

*Girl stopped communicating with me out the Blue. So my Mother sent the police to her house to see If everything was alright. Come to find out there was No Baby. No Nothing and Everything was a lie. To this day I still talk to her But I will always Be Hurt from what she did.*

The story doesn't stop here, however. Eventually, I left home and went to Richmond. In the beginning of the second semester, I found myself in a conversation with some teammates and a group of girls. One of the girls is best friends with Kristen's sister...the individual that I woke up last summer. I had no idea that they were friends! She explained that she had been advised to introduce herself from Kristen's sister, but she didn't know how. This was the perfect time. She said that Kristen's sister told her everything about that one night when I woke her up in the middle of the night. That brought back some great memories for me. We were able to get a really good laugh and I became friends with her and a group of her friends.

It's a small world!

*“Though he felt a little embarrassed about sharing this, the fact that he did so so naturally showed me that he is slowly but surely becoming more comfortable with me.”*

## **“A Time When I Taught Someone”**

**L. W.**

It was 2014 and my lil cousin was getting signed up for football. It was the first practice and me my uncle and my brother were watching him play and he was not good. That night I took him outside and I was showing him how to catch, and work on his defensive skills. He actually was catching on fast. So the next time he went to practice, he looked way better the second practice than he did the first time. He was catching some passes and making good plays.

**E. B.**

Three weeks ago, I was recruited to be a goalie coach for an up and coming field hockey club right here in Richmond. While I have been a hockey goalie for years, I've never actually coached anyone. Suddenly, I was faced with the challenge of teaching four inexperienced high schoolers how to play one of the most difficult positions on the field, and feared that these kids would think I was terrible or useless. Needless to say, I was terrified.

Still, I showed up to the first practice and, while anxious, I put on the most enthusiastic expression that I could. After some introductions, the young keepers hopped right into the goal, completely unphased by my telling them what to do, even though they knew I was only a couple of years older than them.

I noticed that the first goalie to step up to the plate was a freshman who shared both my name and my number, which means I instantly took a liking to her; she was practically like looking into a mirror of myself when I first started playing, and the fact that she looked at me with such an eagerness to learn had me getting excited to get

started. When the first few shots came around though, mini-me was practically ducking for cover. After watching for a while and wincing at every ball smacking the back of the cage, I took her aside and knelt down to her height.

“So tell me,” I said. “Is this your first time ever playing?”

She looked up at me shyly, and whispered “Yeah, if you can’t tell I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Are you a little bit afraid of the ball?”

That earned me another nod, so I thought way back to the first time I ever worked with my goalie coach, the man who worked tirelessly with me for four years to get me into D1 hockey shape. Those memories of early training sessions led me to one of my favorite old conditioning methods.

So, like any good coach, I pegged the ball at her. Repeatedly.

At first, she flinched like I was shooting her close range with a pistol. But after a while, it clicked that it wasn’t hurting. She was padded from head to toe and suddenly, her face lit up with the realization that she was okay. So I sent her back into the cage and she saved the first shot that came at her. With her face.

She turned to me and flashed me a thumbs up, one I returned with a huge smile. I realized then that I didn’t need to teach these kids how to be Olympians. Teaching them how to love the sport was a good enough place to start.

## **P. T.**

During my first semester of college, I almost joined the Varsity Cross-Country/Track & Field team. While going through the prospective runner process, I met a girl in my grade who currently runs on the team. We became



friends thanks to the process, and even though I did not end up joining the team, we remained close. Since I ran Cross-Country/Track & Field in high school, I have an immense love for the sport. I enjoy sharing that passion with other people, which includes motivating them to run, or just giving them running advice. During fall break, my friend became very anxious and scared for her upcoming track season. She did not have much confidence and began doubting herself. In addition, her coach was putting added pressure on her to do well which did not help her nerves. It was easy for me to see why she was apprehensive, because I knew that if I was in her position I would most likely be the same way. Joining a new team at a new school comes with high expectations, especially at the collegiate level. We texted throughout fall break, and she explained to me that she desperately needed some words of wisdom. I decided to share what I believed would help her, but I would have never guessed the impact that my words would make.

After she discussed her lack of self-confidence and fears for the season, I told her to take a deep breath and think about who she is. She is a runner that was recruited to run at a Division 1 school, which is a tremendous thing to be proud of. She is determined to be great and was chosen by Richmond for a reason, and if she truly believes that she can accomplish anything. She shouldn't compare herself to others, because that is the biggest killer of confidence and self-esteem. Every day she needs to believe she has potential to excel, and try to be better than the athlete she was yesterday. I told her to set goals and reward herself when she reaches them. Lastly, I explained that it's necessary to not get caught up in the idea of not being good enough because she always will be.

To my surprise, she told me that when she read my message she started crying. It was exactly what she needed

to hear, and to hear it coming from a friend that she just met a couple months ago meant everything to her. She screenshotted it and told me that she reads it before every race, reminding her to remember she's good enough and has the ability to succeed. It calms her down and relieves her pre-race nerves. Through that exchange of wisdom, she and I have even become stronger friends. She is forever grateful that I taught her to believe in herself, however cliché that sounds. Likewise, I am so glad that I was able to impact her in the way that I did.



*“Every time we went to Bon Air, I didn’t want to stop what I was doing and go. Every time it was over, I didn’t want to stop what I was doing and leave.”*

## **“Tell About A Time When You Were Stuck”**

**B. W.**

First semester of this year, I started volunteering at Huguenot High School with the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Huguenot is a predominantly black and Hispanic school, and I do not fit in very well. The classes are rowdy, and security guards line the hallways at all times. I generally felt safe there, but sometimes odd things happened.

This particular Friday, I did my usual job, reading English books with students and helping them fill out their weather words worksheets. Another girl from the University of Richmond named Gabi was in the classroom next door. We learned that the last period class would not meet. It was the night of the school’s homecoming and students would go to the football field for a pep rally instead. To beat the rush, Gabi and I met outside a few minutes before class ended.

We sat outside on the bleachers, watching the cheerleaders, band, and football players warm up. Music blared over the loudspeaker and everyone was dancing. The atmosphere was energetic as we waited for the rest of the students to come outside. They never did. Minutes went by, long past the scheduled start time.

A voice came over the intercom and announced, to our surprise, that the pep rally would be cancelled because the school was on a hard lockdown. Gabi and I panicked. We were imagining the worst – shooters, bomb threats, things like that. Yet we couldn’t leave. We were dependent on Richmond’s shuttle schedule to be picked up. There was almost an hour left.

No one else seemed worried. The music kept playing; the dancers kept dancing. Apparently things like this happened often. I, on the other hand, was incredibly

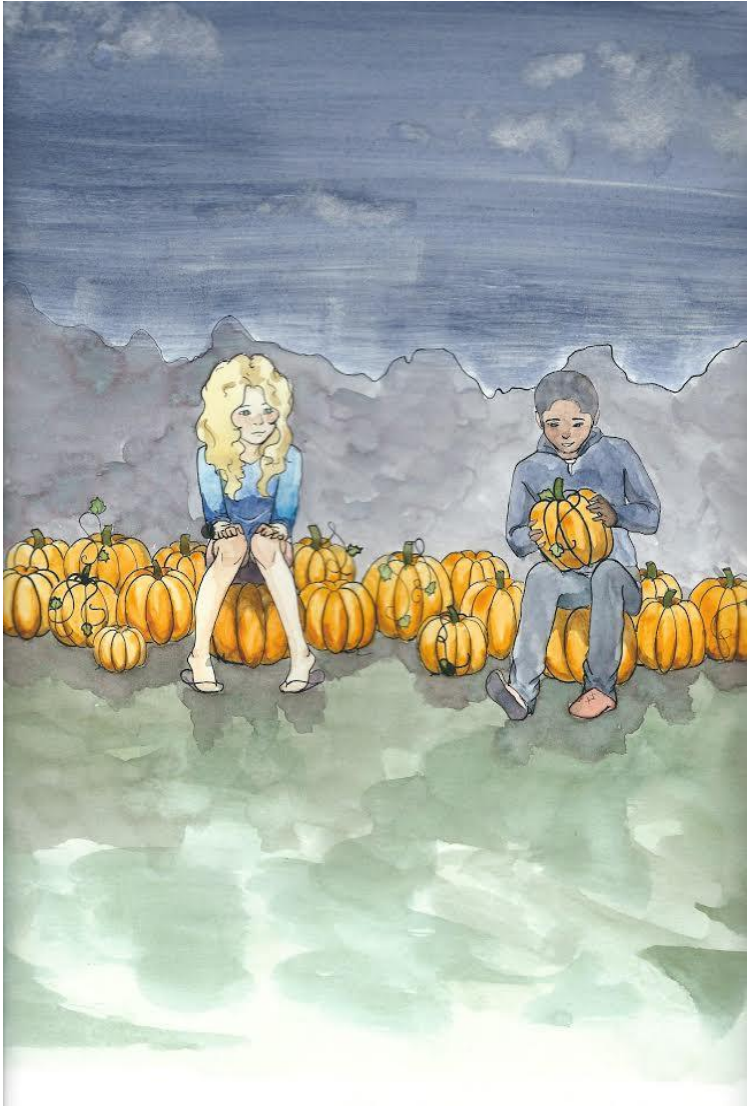
anxious, curious as to what was going on inside, as to whether the threat would truly be contained inside. Finally, our shuttle pulled up to Huguenot. As we hurried to the parking lot, I stared into the glass building, but no one was in the hallway. Still, I was not back at ease until we arrived back on Richmond's campus.

I did not discover until I returned to the high school the next week what had occurred. The teacher I work with told me that security had caught wind of an "epic" fight planned between the black and Hispanic students in the heat of the excitement from homecoming. They were trying to put an end to it before it began. No one else, even the people stuck inside, was as worried as I was, but I had never been in a situation like that before. You can never be too careful.

### **M. C.**

Me and my two friends Anthony and Mark planned on going to the Ashland Berry Farm (Haunted hayride & maze). Everybody was going and we just wanted to see what it was about. We called up Christina (one of my mother's friends). She came and picked us up. When we arrived there we went to the front. At first we were just walking around chillin. Then we get somethin to eat. After that we try to go in the maze. But what we didn't know was it cost 20 dollars a person. So we went back into the parking lot. We were all mad, cause we couldn't get in there, and we didn't have a ride back home because Christina said she was going to pick us up in a couple hours. So one of my friends said let's sneak in there. We were bored and we didn't want to look dumb so that's why I thought about sneaking in. We end up agreeing, and we went to a house up the street, near the maze. The sign at their house said No Trespassing. So we snuck around their house, and walk in a

pumpkin field. We had to sneak into the maze. Because they had tractors coming around for the hayride. Finally we got there, and people with chainsaws started to chase me. So I got scared and folded up, and went to the ground. When I went to the ground and the guy with the chainsaw saw that I was scared he asked me am I alright then he picked me up. It was mist everywhere so when I got up I couldn't see my friends. I'm walking around, and then I walk into them. After we walk around for like an hour long. We went out of the maze, and used somebody phone to call Christina. She didn't answer, we kept on calling still no answer. I felt frustrated, mad, and hopeless when Christina didn't come and pick us up. We out there for a couple hours looking for a ride. I ask a cop can we get a ride, and he said no. Me and my friends try to call our people but nobody picked up. So we stand there in the cold for like another hour. We see everybody going home. The whole time I thought we were stuck there. But our last hope saved us. The guy who ran the whole thing gave us a ride home.





*"These boys were beautiful contradictions, they lived with a rift of who they were and who they wanted to be. They told stories of wild chases and dreamed of soft summer nights."*

## **“Lessons Learned”**

**M. M.**

Every summer I typically make a new goal for myself in order to avoid the monotony of work, the pool, and Netflix. The summer before my 10<sup>th</sup> grade year I decided that I would complete my first triathlon. The event was to be sponsored by the local YMCA and held at Armco Park, a campground about 30 minutes from my house. I figured that if I could work my hardest throughout the summer, I would be compensated with success. At the very least, I could bask in the enjoyment of beating my little brother.

The first portion of a triathlon is the swim. I vividly remember the wave of nausea that rolled through my stomach as I watched my competition effortlessly slip on their team-logo-adorned caps. When the whistle screeched, we all torpedoed into the water. The other kids, knowing the exact way to position their arms so that their goggles would stay glued to their face, had the benefit of underwater vision. My little lenses, on the other hand, gurgled a laugh as they filled with eye-stinging water.

An eternity later, I slithered out of the pool. The crowd cheered hysterically, as if I was the kid who ate crayons and licked windows. Then, because I wasn't embarrassed enough already, exhaustion turned my legs to spaghetti, and I fell, getting sauce colored blood on the prickly gray cement. Then I stood up...and fell again. Leaning on the cold fence for support, I tried to make my way over to my bike for the next portion of the race. My eyes, blurry with unshed tears, caused me to make the mistake of knocking over someone's bike, and, like the dominoes that I never cared for as a child, the entire row tumbled to the ground. "Don't worry about it, honey!"

called an official. "You're doing great!" ...Another (window) pane-ful compliment.

When I mounted my bike, I couldn't see a single racer ahead of me. My muscles screamed. I almost screamed back. Together, our aggression supplied the fuel necessary to kick it into high gear.

The last part of the race, the run, is where I finally caught up to my brother. Despite numerous attempts though, I could not shake him from my side. With only seconds to go before crossing the checkered line, my brother and I locked eyes just long enough to settle a secret treaty. We did not finish the race holding hands, but we might as well have considering how perfectly we seemed to match our last strides.

## **J. B.**

Ever since I was a child my family and I took fishing trips. Fishing was one of the ways that my family spent time together and connected. My father made it a priority to teach me how to fish. He taught me the different techniques needed to be great out fishing. I fell in love with fishing during our second fishing trip, we fished at a local spot in my hometown. The fish spot was at least 6 football fields long and it wrapped around a tall history building. The whole scene had me mesmerized it was flowers of all sorts. Trees the height of skyscrapers, and bugs. We pulled up to the river and it was tons of kids around my age playing all around. We set up our fishing station and threw out our lines. I took off to go play with the other kids and my dad grabbed me and made me wait and watch my hook. I felt angry, sad and disappointed so I hung my legs over the dock and began to cry, my father came to me and asked why am I crying, I told him because I couldn't play with the other kids. He picked me up, and explained to me

that I must have patience to sit there and wait for the fish to take the bait. While he was finishing up explaining to me my pole began to bend, I used the technique he taught me and rigged the hook in the fish's mouth. Slowly but surely I had caught my first catfish and learned a lesson patience is the way to a lot of great things and how to fish!

## V. T.

Every summer my large extended family and I go to Wisconsin where my uncle and aunt own a lake house. The entire week we would go fishing, play in the water, go boating, water skiing, tubing, etc. It was lots of fun, however, I had a secret. I'm secretly terrified of open water. Of course, a lake can hardly be considered open water, but honestly anywhere I can't exactly see the bottom is pretty scary. I have this awful thought that a shark is just going to rise out from the water and swallow me whole, like jaws. My fear is not limited to sharks, included are giant squids, moray eels, creepy deep sea fish, large not-so-deep-sea fish, the Lochness Monster, and anything really with sharp teeth and fins. I would just be floating there in the middle of the lake and SNAP! I'm gone.

As you can imagine activities on the lake were far from ideal for me. Unfortunately, they were also the height of the trip, the amount of fun you had was determined by the amount of time spent on the water. Now tubing, how to describe it. It's usually a tame activity, an inflatable donut or disk is mounted to the back of a boat and pulled along behind it. However, the way my family does it is we tow two inflatables, load as many people as we can on them, and have my crazy uncle try to fling us off. I am proud to say that I hold the record for survivability, admittedly it's due to sheer terror of being in the water and not by virtue of my impressive biceps. It usually takes a

long time for me to gear up and get in the boat, or on the tube, or in the water, involving jumping jacks and shouting motivational phrases at myself. One time I was riding on a flat tube and I was feeling pretty great, if a shark tried to eat me it would surely choke on the tube first. We were zooming across the lake hanging on despite drastic ninety degree turns and getting rolled over. Suddenly the tube hit the wake of another boat and I was flung ten feet in the air, no twenty, no forty. In any case it was really high and I was doing somersaults, flips, and cartwheels. I keep on spinning until I smacked into the water. Full on splat and sink. I'm not going to lie, it really hurt. Try to imagine doing a belly flop from a high dive tower. Later, I had bruises all up and down my right side, my battle scars. Luckily though, I was in so much pain it didn't matter that I was floating in the water about to get eaten by a giant squid, or that the seaweed that touched my leg felt a lot like a shark fin. My belly flop-wipe out put a lot of things in perspective. Fear of open water suddenly seemed insignificant compared to getting flung fifty feet in the air. I learned to face my fears and that fear is all relative.

*"I knew that I wanted to try my best to make a positive impact on my partner, but little did I know the impact he would have on me."*

## **“A Time I Stayed Silent”**

**J. H and L. M.**

*It was April 5, 2015 when Ray called me for no particular reason he said he just wanted to hang out before I go away for spring break. But I already planned to go to the mall with another friend so I told Daniel to pick up Ray to take along with us. It was the end of the first semester of my freshman year. It had been unusually fun -- I had low expectations from the experiences my older siblings shared with me about their freshman year. I had made a home with my roommate. We were close and felt comfortable with each other. I asked Ray did he have money with him because I don't like people who steal around me. He told me he could borrow money from his cousin, so that was our next stop. At night we talked to each other for hours, spilling our concerns to each other and giving one another advice. From time to time, we would dance in our room -- it made mornings and the painful act of getting up a little bit more bearable. You could say we had the ideal friendship -- roommates who were perfectly in sync. It made the college transition easier. As finals approached, we began to stress out together; yet both focused and hardworking, we knew we would be fine. We pulled up to a large house. Ray got out of the four door sedan and rang the doorbell, instantly my stomach dropped. It was a Monday, mid afternoon. She was in the library, studying, when she got the call from her mother telling her she had to come home the next morning. Her father was sick. Something told me something was up because it was 90 something degrees and he had on a black Northface jacket. He had cancer. No one answered. A weight was lifted off my shoulders until he walked around back, now the pressure was on again. I thought about calling him but then I remembered that his phone only worked using wi-fi. After her mom called, she proceeded to get excused from her exams. I came into the*

room after an afternoon of studying and she was packing. Claire explained that they were leaving at 5 am the next morning and she was not going to take her exam. *So I told Daniel when he gets back to the car tell him he has to take the car back home. Soon as we come up with the good excuse what sounds like a bank alarm sounds the neighborhood.* When the alarm went off the next morning and she prepared to leave, I told her I loved her. *I jumped out the car so fast I couldn't feel my legs, when I got to the backyard Ray's legs was stuck in the window. And from there I knew we were going to jail. I carried Ray to the car and Daniel drove off. We got two blocks away when a Hampton police officer rammed the front of our car and flipped it.* It was that day, I learned her dad was in special care in the hospital. That day, I looked at the wet tissues scattered across the floor near her bed, and realized she had spent the night crying. That day, I learned she hadn't come home because she was out with others, expressing her worries about whether her family could withstand this loss, and what it would mean for her sister and mom. *I woke up in a holding cell getting processed and booked. My trial came and both Ray and Daniel testified against me. They told the judge I planned the whole thing.* The next morning I received a text that Claire's father had died. I didn't know what to say or do. It seemed surreal. I wanted to be there for the funeral but she was nine hours away, and I still had two tests to take. But how could I focus on my studies when someone I loved was in pain? There was nothing I could do. *The judge didn't want to hear me out and sent me upstate for a 2 year sentence. Now I've worked on campus, got an OSHA's certificate and earned an early release. I plan to move to North Carolina and plan to start a new life.*



*“As soon as we sat down together, I said, “You’re going to have to be real with me if we’re going to get anything out of this” and asked if he was willing to do this. He agreed.”*

## **“A Time I Felt Safe”**

**J. K.**

A time I felt most safe is not one specific time, but a recurring experience throughout my childhood. I live in the attic of my house, which is actually a really cool spot. Me and my brother, who is two years younger than me play “knee hockey” and love to hangout up there in our free time. We let our minds wander when we get tired, discussing the specifics of our lives; Our ups, downs, and everything in between. However, sometimes it would thunderstorm and the winds would howl over our heads, thunder would crash, lightning piercing our eyes. We would sit up there covering our ears and comforting each other, waiting for an end which seemed to drag on forever. After we had enough we would run down to our parents room, and climb onto the cloud-like king size bed they slept in and sleep in between them. The warm bodies of my parents and brother around me made me feel more safe than ever before. I felt like nothing bad could happen to me as I was cocooned in the embrace of my parents and brother by my side.

**K. W.**

A time I felt safe, was when I got first time incarcerated. My mom was on my side. She convinced me it was okay & it would be over soon. She wrote me every opportunity she had & answered my phone calls. She has been supportive from the beginning I seen her while incarcerated to now. My mother taught me how to be independent and how to treat a woman. She has done her best to keep me out of harm’s way. The protection skills she used when I was younger are the ones I use today while I’m incarcerated.

*“My partner and I persevered through our personal barriers and created a safe environment where we could share our stories.”*

## **“A Time When You Lost Someone”**

**J. B.**

My favorite memory with my friend Trent was when I had a party on my 15th birthday. It was fun because we spent time together without getting in any trouble. When I found out Trent had got killed it hurt me because I was incarcerated. Also because we were so close, it felt like no one could break us apart. My feelings were sadder than usual because I was torn apart, it was like the other half of me was gone and I would never be able to see him again. I looked up and strived to be like Trent because most of the time he was the positive person in my life, trying to keep me on the right track. The impact he had on my life was nice because we did many things together. We tried to help each other do the right things in life. He basically taught me alot. I still know I loved him and still do. We had a lot of good times together because we loved to party and have fun with friends.

**M. F.**

I remember the exact moment I found out. It was October 3rd 2014. I was home for the long weekend and I was in my bathroom about to hop in the shower when I heard my phone ringing. It was one of my fellow advisees. “Have you heard about Mr. Dickson?” She asked. “No, What happened?” I quickly responded and she told me to sit down. After hearing the news, I immediately crumpled to the ground. All I could think about was that I had seen him two days ago.

I went into the living room bawling my eyes out and sat on my couch for hours not doing anything. Finally my mom came home and tried to comfort me but it was

impossible. There was an emptiness inside of me. It felt like I got the wind knocked out of me but the feeling never passed. The next night I saw some of my friends and drank until I blacked out. I just wanted it to be a bad dream where I would wake up and have everything go back to normal. I missed the next week of school and drove to New Hampshire with my fellow advises to attend his funeral. I was depressed. Even talking to his parents and crying with them didn't give me closure. I managed to choke out that I respected and admired their son and that he was family in my eyes. While the experience of attending his funeral did help, it took me more than a year to stop thinking about it on a consistent basis.

*"A big difference that I noticed between our first and second visits was that during our first visit, we were telling stories because that's what we were supposed to do. During our second visit, we were telling stories to put together the pieces of one another's lives."*

## **“Who do you feel loyalty to?”**

**K. C.**

Someone I feel loyal to would probably be my mom because she's been there with me through good and hard times. Sometimes I can't count on her for doing something for me and a lot of other things but she is my mother. My dad had to move back to where he came from when I was around 2 so he's never really been in my life. So I was left with my mom. The main reason me and my mom are so close is because I can understand her about money problems, moving all the time, switching job, etc. So I can see the way she live and I tell myself that I got to be there for her and always show loyalty to her and never quit on her. I am her oldest child and the one she has to count on the most.

**L. H**

My mother and father both grew up in small government owned homes. Their parents both worked full time low pay jobs and they went to public schools until they were 16 years old when they both went out to work. My granddad on my mother's side had a chronic illness, which meant he was bed bound for many years. This meant that she was the main income for the family so she worked as a solicitor's clerk and kept being promoted with her hard work. My father has now worked for 40 years straight.

Since I was 14 I have had a job. I worked in a newsagent, a grocery store, did babysitting, and worked in a school. I have had no consistency and that often scares me. I have always done it for a few months or a year before giving it up and trying something new.

I am a first generation college student who doesn't know what to major in or have any idea of career plans. My

parents have set this high work ethic bar and I am fearful I will not be able to meet this bar.

My irregularity in jobs concerned me but my parents assured me that although I have this doubt of matching my parents they do not expect me too. They understand I am in the fortunate position of finishing my schooling and to pursue something of interest not just to provide. I will put this fear aside and look for faith that when I find my job of choice by parents work ethic will help me go the extra mile.



*“Being able to look back on the experience now as a whole, I am so thankful for the opportunities and experiences that I have been given through this program. A serious stigma I had seen was broken down and I got to build a relationship with someone extremely different from me.”*

## **“Who inspires me?”**

**S. M.**

A person that inspires me is my uncle. His name is Glendale Moore, he was born in Norfolk VA and he is currently 43 and lives in N.C. The main reason he inspire me because he have a passion for what he does best. And that's being a brick mason. A brick mason is a person that builds things such as houses, towers, and building ect. And also he was known for his hard working skills. Which later down the road gave him the title of being the best brick mason in the state of VA. Also he was a caring person who always able to give back to the people who needed it.

Another person that inspire me is Maya Angelou. I think she is a beautiful speaker. She shows people how to stand up for themselves in a positive. And she has amazing quotes and poems that inspire me.

Also another person that inspires me is my mentor and a good friend of mine. Her name is Jeanette, she is 18 attends University of Richmond and is a freshman. I say she inspire me because she gave me a different look of my life. She told me or you can say help me pick the best route to take in my life. And she also inspire me to look out for the youth. She has an interest for building a foundation for are younger peers. Which I hope on doing too. But these are the people that inspire me.

**J. L.**

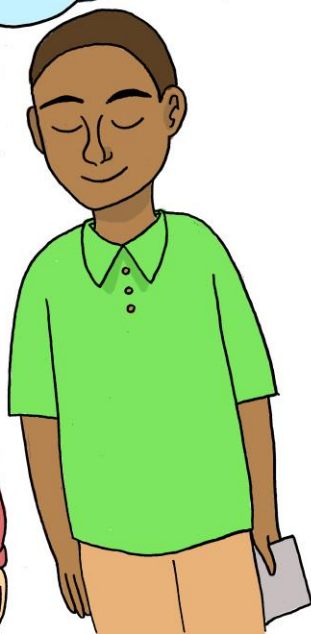
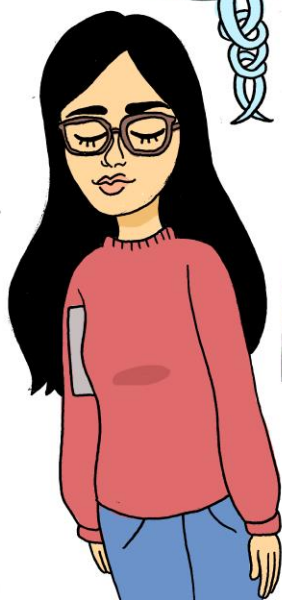
It was the morning of our last Bon Air visit. Rolling out of bed on a Saturday morning and making it to the bus which departed at 9:30 am was typically a struggle, but something about this day was different. I got out of bed an hour early, flickered on my desk lamp, and silently shuffled around for pen and paper, cautious not to wake my roommate. My hand moved across the first line, scripting in

its best handwriting, "Dear Shy..." A sudden, indescribable feeling came over me. Writing this letter, the morning of the last time I may ever see my Bon Air partner, I realized I was not the same person who entered Bon Air for the first time three months ago. Somewhere, somehow along the short time we shared, Shy subtly, yet meaningful, changed me.

Shy is an extraordinary eighteen-year-old who always wears a contagious smile, despite what may be happening in his personal life. When my classmates and I arrived at our second Bon Air visit, Shy was missing from the group. The program facilitator said he had dealt with a difficult situation earlier in the week and was not ready for this session. I was sad that we would miss out on the opportunity to exchange more stories, especially since we only got to meet three times. However, moments later, Shy surprisingly walked in the door. I was uncertain how to initiate conversation, but he immediately sat down - present, responsive, and smiling. He asked me about my past week and we dove right into a plethora of deep and not-so-deep talks. From sharing moments where we felt safe and unsafe, to talking about the friendship bracelets on our wrists, I was captivated by our similarities despite our different walks of life. I hope Shy knows how much him coming that day meant to me. I was impressed by his commitment to the program and his willingness to not only show up, but to be fully engaged and open. On the bus ride back to campus, I found myself staring out the window thinking about how often when life gets difficult, people close themselves off. It is the easiest solution. Rarely are we courageous enough to see vulnerability as a good thing and adversity as a catalyst for growth. Shy has opened up my eyes to the idea that life is richer when lived fully, embracing both the good and bad.

During our last visit, I asked Shy what he wanted to do upon his quickly approaching release. He told me the first thing he wanted to do was go to Waffle House because he loved it. We both laughed and I still laugh reminiscing about this memory because it is a reminder that sometimes the simplest things bring the greatest joys. As we continued talking, Shy shared with me that he is actually leaving his hometown and moving to a new state to live with his uncle. Struck by the fact that he does not really know his uncle, I asked him why he would not rather return to his familiar home life. He said "I want to start new." To be quite honest, for as many times as I have wanted to do something new or make a profound change in my life, I have always struggled to collect the courage to simply do it. Though he has been stripped from conventional life for some time, Shy continues to live with great conviction. He inspires me to live more ambitiously, without fear of the unknown. For this, I am thankful.

Who  
inspires  
me?



*"When you really break it down, they are people with feelings and dreams just like you and me."*

You have now read our stories. We hope these stories told in context of one another help you recognize that similarities exist, even in individuals from different walks of life. Though we, University of Richmond students, all gained different insights, we were united by the unique experience of getting proximate to the lives of incarcerated youth. Through storytelling, we established relationships which enabled us and Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center residents to understand our lives in a new light. It is no easy task opening up to strangers, but it is certainly worthwhile. Dismissing stereotypes, we were able to recognize that at the end of the day, we are all simply human. Everyone's stories matter because everyone's life matters.

\* \* \*

After the project, members of our class reflected on our experiences:

"I left with a renewed sense of hope that I actually helped. He may be that introverted, tough boy that he wrote about, but maybe he felt some of my love." - B.W.

"Though I still question the long-term effects of such programs, I knew on our last bus ride that despite everything this program isn't, it's incredibly worth it for what it is." - J.L.

"When my partner thanked me for simply showing up, I realized how big of an impact that can really have." - M.L.

"Just as we were able to completely break down each other's barriers, time seemed to have got the best of us."  
- J.K.

The young men at Bon Air JCC also reflected on their experiences. Of his experience with the students from the University of Richmond, one partner said: "It was alright, but I don't like to talk a lot."- K.W. Another said: "I like it because I got to learn her experience with some of her story."- M.L.

Many of our partners from Bon Air said they appreciated just having someone with a listening ear. When asked how they felt about having someone listen, they responded:

"Alright—cause they paying attention."- K.W.

"Very good. Usually we talk and no one listens."- C.J.

"I felt respected and like I wasn't locked up."- S.F.

"Good, cause usually people don't want to listen to my problems."- M.L.

Our partners from Bon Air JCC also said they learned:

"Trust" from his partner. -L.W.

"...that knowing you help others sometimes just by listening."- K.W.

"...that I'm easy to get along with."- K.C.

One individual's favorite part of the experience was "getting to know somebody else and be comfortable enough to talk."- K.W. A different partner enjoyed the program because "when we talked felt I could tell her some stuff."- T.H.

\* \* \*



In the state of Virginia in 2013, within one year of their release, 46.3% of juveniles were reincarcerated.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the residents that we worked with were about to be released. Where do they go from there? How can we prevent the cycle of reincarceration?

Our project and others aim to listen to the voices and lives of young people who have been incarcerated. This is just one part of the complex solution; it's your turn to join the conversation. Whether it is sharing this book with someone else, educating yourself about the topic, volunteering on a similar project, or becoming politically active, you can have an impact.

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<sup>1</sup> "Juvenile and Adult Recidivism." *Virginia Performs*. 4 June 2015. Web. 28 Feb. 2016.