

# Titan Tribune

Issue 11

May 2021

## Visitation returns after several months without seeing family due to COVID

**By C. E.**

During visitation this past weekend, I saw my daughter and I got to hold her for the first time. I was also glad to see my grandmother and grandfather. They were happy to see me.

My grandmother and I talked about a lot of things. My daughter was playful and happy to see me. She looks just like me.

It's been so long without seeing my family. I'm glad visitation opened back up. I do not feel alone anymore, I miss my family. I just want to go home, so I can do the right things for my daughter. When she was here, I walked around with her. Then I showed her the new recreation area outside.

My baby was so happy to see her daddy.

**By D. K.**

Visitation was a great experience for me because I haven't seen my family in 15 months. My mom and my two brothers drove a long way from home to see me in Miami, but my mother said it was worth the drive!

Seeing my family over the weekend after so long made me feel like I missed out on so much in life because my brothers got taller and bigger from when I left so long ago.

Visitation changed my perspective on everything by showing me that time doesn't stop or revolve around me while I'm incarcerated.

**By J. S.**

The visitation I received this weekend was great. I got to see my sister, dad, and my mother after waiting four months for it to open up.

I felt like time was still moving too quickly during visitation but I used it wisely and talked until I had nothing to say anymore.

The visitation impacted my thinking because seeing my family in person made me want to come home sooner, which is going to make me behave better at the program.

My favorite part of the visitation was just seeing my family in general. I'm excited to leave soon because I will be able to see them every day. When I go home I will become a better person.

# M. D. wins poetry contest

Miami Youth Academy student M. D. won First Place for middle school in Miami-Dade County Public School's PIANO SLAM 13 contest.

**By M. D.**

The poem of my life is like the ocean  
Because all the things here are in motion  
I'm baffled when I think about how I got to this beach  
The rhythm I followed created the song of me  
I think that how I act is part of it, part of my beat  
But to make the beat right I had to make sacrifices  
Those sacrifices got me into trouble  
Music was too loud  
I wrote the wrong songs trying to make a hit  
My song until now, "I have to hustle"  
I have to change my mindset, my song list  
I have to ask myself if I can maintain the beat  
Sometimes I tell myself I'm bored  
Maybe I can try gospel, talk to the lord  
Then, they got me right off the map  
Now how will I start my career in rap?  
When I got in my cell I felt crossed from the back  
But I'm in a groove now and I don't have to pack  
I don't know why I'm down so much, I'm too sad  
Do you know how it feels to not have a dad?



# PIANO SLAM



Do you know how it feels to get locked up?  
It's like playing the blues on a loop, it feels bad  
Tempo building up, I'm just so freaking mad  
My new album comes out in June, "Freedom"  
I think I can make it if I write a new song  
With a steady time signature to move me along  
I won't worry about the noise behind my back  
I have to focus on my rhythm and properly act  
I know I'm young, and I'm still learning to dance  
The ocean is wide, I can't take it in at a glance  
It's always in motion like a song or a groove  
But with a calm beat and soft winds and some love  
I might keep mine smooth

# Four MYA students participate in PIANO SLAM 13

By Titan Tribune staff

M. D., D. K., D. T. and A. M. submitted poetry for the PIANO SLAM 13 contest in December, 2020. They were among 1,271 student entries from schools throughout Miami-Dade County Public Schools. All entries were judged in three rounds: initially with community activists and writing professors, culminating in a final round of prominent, published poets. The finalists must receive a unanimous yes vote from all eleven of the poet judges.

M. and D. were selected as finalists on April 1. Then the contest announced four overall winners on May 13, 2021: two from middle school, including M., and two from high school.

For being one of four winners, M. was awarded \$1,000, in addition to a \$100 prize for being a finalist. D. also received \$100 for being a finalist.

M. and D. received individualized coaching for writing, public appearance and performance in advance of the contest finale.

For 13 years, the Dranoff 2 Piano Foundation's PIANO SLAM has been a highly successful musical performance and education program that incorporates an annual poetry and spoken-word competition. Miami Youth Academy has participated the past two years. Last year, two students from Miami Youth Academy were finalists as well.

M. described the experience as a great opportunity. "I think it was pretty good. It was hard for me, because other contestants had great poems. Coaches helped me a lot. My coach, John Acevedo, is a poet. He told me things I should change."

When asked if he had ever done anything like PIANO SLAM, he replied, "I never did poetry like this before. I did win an art contest at RR Moton. I won 2nd or third place, drawing of a flower.

When asked for advice for future contestants, M. said, "If you put your mind to it, you can probably do it. It was hard at the beginning, but I told myself I could do it."



## WELCOME

This is the 11<sup>th</sup> issue of the Titan Tribune, a newspaper about Miami Youth Academy that is reported and written by the journalism students here.

The class and newspaper are a collaboration of MYA, Exchange for Change and Miami-Dade County Public Schools Division of Educational Opportunity and Access. Exchange for Change is a non-profit that teaches writing classes in youth commitment and adult correctional facilities.

The paper is edited by retired newspaper reporter Mr. Henry Unger, an Exchange for Change volunteer. He is assisted by MYA teacher Mr. Jesus Gonzalez. The paper's layout and design were done by Miami-Dade teacher Mr. Daniel Wynne.

# D. K. chosen as finalist for PIANO SLAM 13

By D. K.

Like alternating meters, my life is so hard  
I don't know why the streets are so dangerous  
I'm feeling scared  
COVID is a pathogen it's going to multiply and try to take me out  
I had good intentions but I switched it up and took another route  
Writing raps in cells, wasn't getting mail or sending nothing out  
An open ear is also a running mouth  
Watch the volume, not too loud  
Watch your heart rate, beating to crescendo  
Got different tempos like an instrumental, detrimental  
The climate getting hotter, what's up with all these changes  
Trapped in a cell, a house, a room, my life is so full of strangeness  
Sadness, madness, feeling of aggression  
My intellectual capability far exceeds the sea level

## Additional PIANO SLAM 13 participants

By D. T.

As I sit and think about my aria  
My understanding grows to crescendo  
I use my mind and think about the future  
Time is what has been wasted  
Now it's freedom I wish I tasted  
Growing up without a mother, elegy of sorrow  
Conductor of my life, now till tomorrow  
There's still love for you in my heart momma  
I promise not to change  
I have learned to make something out of nothing.  
Forte! This is my life  
Growing up being disobedient, dissonance  
Messed up my image, rewind/replay  
A person trying to gain love, screaming for attention

Blasting my rhymes as loud as I could, please listen  
Not being myself has taken over me  
Someday that will change, time past  
June 17<sup>th</sup> 2020, I was shot in the face BANG!  
Didn't listen to my grandmother's song  
I should have stayed home  
I lay down on the ground holding my face  
Thinking is this over? Will I survive and get a second show?  
This young man is growing up, tempo rising  
And will become something as I compose a new story  
I got my chance and know I'm going to take advantage  
I'll write my new concert and perform it on stage  
This is my life

**By A. M.**

My life is like COVID, family isolating and all I see are deaths  
Times are getting harder like water turning into ice  
People are telling me relax, and be more serene  
But it's difficult in this cacophony of shattered dreams  
All the thoughts in my head are piling up like trash in a dumpster  
The notes of my life are a song getting darker  
My life has been rocked and rolled  
Like a tornado shredding through a town  
I'm so furious, and upset all I can do is frown  
A crescendo, rage growing like a cat 5 hurricane  
Speakers blowing, going insane!  
All I can hear is demons screaming my name  
When is this concert going to end?  
Will my second symphony sound the same?  
Would I be able to change?  
Compose a new opus and try to maintain  
COVID changed the tempo, fortissimo, CRASH!  
And made everything dark, descending in vibrato  
But I have hope for the future, vaccines are out  
Adagio but allegro, the sun is coming out  
I look forward to writing the new coda of my life  
A new beginning without any strife  
A refreshing new tune that brightens the sky  
A new rhythm and beat, testament to life  
And how I've changed since COVID came about  
No more darkness ahead, just clear harmonies and sounds  
Every day is getting better, will be better, must be better!  
Everything is changing back from bad to good!  
From introduction to curtain call, we will all Survive!



# Student exchange program with UM provides valuable insights

By J. S., D. K., C. E., A. D. and L. H.

The University of Miami students who participated in an exchange class with MYA said they got a lot out of it.

In several interviews with the UM criminology students, as well as in written responses to our questions, they said they appreciated how open and honest we were during the online exchange classes.

They said they really did not have a solid understanding of how the juvenile justice system worked and how we were treated before talking with us in the class. In some ways, we were able to provide information they could not get from reading books.

The classes are a collaboration between MYA, UM and Exchange for Change. Here are examples of their responses to a few of our questions:

## **Was your experience with us MYA kids different from what you were expecting?**

*Cassandra: This experience was unlike anything I have done before, I did not have any expectations when we first started this, as it was all new to me. However, I believe I gained more knowledge than I thought I would out of this experience. As I learned a lot from my partner by hearing his point of view as a kid in the system.*

*Carly: I really enjoyed the meetings we had with the MYA students. I was a little nervous that they wouldn't want to talk to us about certain things, or wouldn't be interested in answering our questions, but that wasn't the case at all. It was great to be able to ask the questions we had about the system and how MYA was impacting them, but it was also great to talk about things in their personal lives like what they are looking forward to when they leave the program and what they want to do when they get older.*

*Christopher: No, I tried not to go into the program with negative expectations as they're normal people like me. It was always a positive interaction and experience and I wish nothing but the best for J. as he's a good kid with a good heart.*

*Arianna: I honestly feel like I had a great experience with my partner. I didn't want anyone to feel uncomfortable and to cross any lines with any questions or anything we should not get into, but I feel like our group talked openly and appropriately. For these reasons I had a great experience and really felt like we both learned a lot from each other.*

## **Did your view on people in the "system" change from taking this course?**

*Aaron: Most definitely yes. Everyone has a different story, and partnering with MYA I have come to realize that. I used to overgeneralize about people in the system, but meeting you guys through this program has made me realize that every individual is unique and each individual has a different reasoning as to why they are in the system.*

*Brianna: No before I did not have any preconceived idea of the characteristics of people in the system because I know anyone can end up in the system and it is not just one kind of person who commits a crime.*



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Bae: *I think mine did. I had seen a lot of media about mistreatment of minors in the juvenile justice system, and I had no idea that programs like MYA even existed. I think seeing Mr. Wynne and the two women who spoke to us made me see that there are good people out there who want to help these kids.*

Kylie: *I did not have many views or expectations of people in the system going in and believe every person has their own story. From what I saw, they are like normal kids that are trying to do better and got caught up in some mistakes. C. was very friendly and similar to us and we enjoyed talking to him a lot. He also has goals to do better and I think a lot of other kids in the system do as well and want the resources to do so.*

Veronica: *My view on people in the system did change because I used to sort of judge juveniles in the system as those portrayed on TV, but I learned that really isn't the reality. These individuals in the system have goals and aspirations like any other person. These people are trying to get out of there and start their lives. I used to think that those individuals were all criminals who did something really bad, but I've noticed that is not always the case and that they are really nice and funny.*

### **Is there anything you would like to share with MYA kids about your experience?**

Hannah: *My experience with MYA was awesome. I wasn't expecting to get to know you guys to the extent that I did. It was definitely the highlight of taking this juvenile justice course with Professor Sokol-Katz. I'm so happy that I got to be a part of this interaction with you guys. It really gave me an inside perspective of how things go in the juvenile justice system.*

Caitie: *I really appreciate all of you opening up and being vulnerable with us, because it takes a lot of courage to do so, especially with random strangers over a web camera. I learned a lot from this experience, and I hope all of you can take away some good stuff, too.*

Olbrine: *This is my favorite class this semester because of you all. Being able to take some time out our days to just talk and reminisce about our past and future is something that I don't do often so thank you for that and I hope you all are successful in any endeavor you put your mind to.*

Maya: *I would like to say that I am very proud of each of you who are making the most of your time at MYA. Once you are able to view your time as an opportunity to become the best version of yourself, and not as a punishment, you will be able to really flourish! There is so much to be proud of and I wish you all the best of luck in your futures. You are all SO capable of being whatever you want to be!!*

Kima: *It's been great getting to hear from someone firsthand about his experience in the justice system. I think it showed me why some juveniles might have been in a difficult situation and what they think they can do to better it. I wish you the best of luck in this journey. It's never been easy but starting is the first step to bigger things. It is hard to say if we are the sum of our individual choices but the decisions taken create our reality.*

Arianna: *I had a great time meeting throughout this semester! I think your plans for after MYA sound great and you should definitely pursue them. I am so happy you have passions, goals and ideas you hope to follow through with! I think keeping busy and finding what you truly love to do can only be beneficial and keep you on the right track! I hope you learned a lot from me because I for sure did from you! Good luck with everything.*



## Four students make MYA Honor Roll

By MYA Teacher Deborah Sanchez

Four students earned the grades to make the honor roll for the third grading period.

J. S. received straight A's to make the principal's honor roll.

C. E., A. M. and D. K. made the A/B Honor Roll for not getting any grades below a B, including on their conduct.

## New recreation yard is a major plus

By N. H.

Through multiple trials and errors, Miami Youth Academy has upgraded the outdoor recreation yard. This has been one of the biggest breakthroughs this program has accomplished while I have been a resident at the facility.

Many of the other youth here are thankful because the improvement was much needed. We are now able to use the basketball courts and we have a bigger area for football.

Now all we need is more time outside, so we can really enjoy more freedom. I think MYA is trying to increase the satisfaction of the youth.



# MYA Letter Exchange with San Quentin

Students at Miami Youth Academy and men who are incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison in California have been exchanging letters.

Below are two letters from the men at San Quentin and the student replies.

## Fallout from COVID

My Friends,

I have to tell you about how COVID-19 affected me.

First of all, I am not from the state of California and I have been in prison for 23 years.

I don't get visits so letter writing, phone calls and the occasional pictures are visits for me. My sons were 12-years-old and 7-years-old when I committed this offense.

The victim of my offense is not the only person who I harmed. I need for you to use your imagination on who all I hurt.

So, when I could not use the phones to talk to my loved ones, I felt sad. I stopped writing family and friends out of fear of not wanting to infect them through letters. This prison had become a bad place for infections. Now, we are not out of danger from COVID-19 but I've been taking extra precautions.

I am begging you not to forget the feelings and thoughts that come with you in not being able to communicate with your loved ones.

My sons have children and I know my grandchildren by the tones of their voices and the occasional pictures. I know what I have missed out on and I hope that you do, too.

My sons tell me all the time that "no amount of money can take them away from their children," which makes me proud of them.

They earn every red cent by the gifts and talents they took time to learn in order to be prepared to provide the care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, trust, and the honest and open communication it takes to raise their own children.

So, my friends, know this – these words are ingredients for real love and it took COVID-19 for me to appreciate everyone and everything in existence.

Love is greater than hate.

A sincere friend,

**Anthony "Habib" Watkins**



# Students reply to Mr. Watkins

Hello Mr. Watkins,

How are you doing? I received your letter and was greatly inspired by it. It really made me think more than twice about committing a crime again after you said you don't really ever get mail or visits from family since you are not from California.

I've been away from my family for almost a year now and I couldn't even begin to imagine how bad it would feel to be away from them for 23 years.

I also was curious, what were you sentenced to? Is there any chance you could get out on parole soon? If you were to get out, what would be the first thing you would do?

Anyways, I appreciate your letter and hope for a response on this one.

Best regards,

**J. S.**

Hi Mr. Watkins,

I'm doing well, thank you. I hope you are, too.

I will get out soon and it feels great. I'm 17 now and I was facing life. I went to real jail for a very serious charge, but I beat it thanks to God. I was blessed enough to get a second chance, with a plea to become a juvenile again and get my charges lowered.

While I have done many things in my life, I feel it is never too late to change. When I get out I'm going to go about my life completely differently. While there have been many people who have tried to help in the past, I didn't listen. But we can learn from past mistakes and start listening to their advice today.

I feel you. I used to use the same emotional anger to help me get through life and the things I was doing.

Thank you for all the insight you gave me. Hopefully, I will hear from you before I go home, but if not I will live better.

Keep your head up. There are better days coming.

Sincerely,

**A. F.**

Miami Youth Academy



# A typical day in prison

We asked the San Quentin letter writers to describe a typical day or days there. Here is one of the descriptions.

Dear MYA Students,

I'm going to tell you about my life locked in a prison of my own making.

When I first started my time it was at Juvenile Hall, then from there to county jail and next to prison.

In the Halls, I fought to release all the anger, stress and helplessness I felt. It didn't work.

In the county jail the rules changed. I was scarcely 18-years-old with a bunch of grown men built like giants going on their second or third prison terms. Drugs, violence and crime always were looking for approval. Lowering my standards and sinking deeper in despair didn't work either.

Next stop prison. Wow the lies I was told. All the glamour there would be, that there was respect and unity. Not in any prison I've ever been to. So maybe if I did more crime, more drugs, then maybe I would be able to numb the hopelessness. Nope that didn't work.

Getting stabbed and sliced with a razor. Talk about an eye opener. I was hurt and felt betrayed. Even so, I still needed to feel like I belonged somewhere. So I callously hurt others to try to gain respect, acceptance and favor. For something I no longer believed in. That didn't work.

Can you see the pattern here? The crazy thing is that my mind was so closed off that I couldn't.

What I did then was to no longer belong to a gang. But I continued to live the same lifestyle and continued to act like a gang member. I continued to commit crime to support my drug addiction, so I could run from my problems. As long as I'm not using violence, I'm not hurting anyone, right?

I'm doing my life sentence on my own terms. Yeah that wasn't true either. So no, that also didn't work.

Imagine 23 years of this. My life ruled by a needle, shame and locked in deep and absolute denial. Having no purpose. Feeling like my life was meaningless. Always scared, bitter and angry. Yeah, this never worked out.

Finally, I put the needle down. I began to see with a clear mind, wanting more for myself. I focused on the opportunities – education and self-help, not alone but with new friends. People believed in me when I didn't believe in myself.

I expected no reward for doing the right thing. Ironically, that's what I got – more opportunities, more support and more true friendships. I regained my faith in people, myself and God. This was the start of things working for me.

Today, I live my life with the most powerful weapon I have. My mind. I'm grateful for all the good I have in my life. I constantly tell myself that my heart is in the right place and to believe in myself. Whenever a negative thought or situation shows up, I replace it with a positive thought. I take the opportunity to show patience and understanding.

Prison is prison. But I don't handcuff myself to old beliefs or attitudes. My actions are based on thoughtful consideration for others. All the effort I used to put in doing the wrong thing, I now use that same energy on working towards my goals. I am succeeding. Six years later, it is still working.

I will give you the best kept secret on how to survive in prison. Are you ready?

**DON'T COME TO PRISON!**

Sincerely,

**Heriberto Arredondo Jr.**

# Student Replies

Dear Heriberto,

The six months I have been here haven't been easy at all. Some days I wake up thinking what I did to be here away from my beloved family. I dwell on the past every time staff wake me up out of my sleep.

One day I'll be able to live the life I have dreamed about. As soon as I get released, I will immediately start working on that dream.

I appreciate the wisdom you have bestowed upon me.

Bless up.

**N. H.**

**The letters below were written to Heriberto as well as to other San Quentin letter writers who described a typical day in prison.**

Thank you for writing.

My life is full of bad choices and needless mistakes. I have robbed, stolen things and got involved with firearms.

The things I did in life were very dumb and even though I'm not the type to regret things, I wish I could take them back.

I loved the thrill of robbing and taking things and it made getting money easy. I dislike being in my situation, but I would hate being in yours.

Sometimes I wish I were rich, so that I didn't have to deal with the hardships of being impoverished.

Sincerely,

**D. K.**

I appreciate you writing to us. It really helps us a lot that we know there are people out there in the world who care about us.

Even though we are in a similar situation, you still take the time out of your days to speak to us.

To me, our day is similar to yours. The biggest difference is that I go home in a few months and I can change my life before it's too late.

Sincerely,

**D. K.**

Thank you for taking the time to write these letters and tell me about your daily life. I find it inspiring that you write to us, trying to help us steer away from that situation.

Thank you for giving me insight on where I could be, which makes me more thankful for my situation. I appreciate learning all the things you told me and how your days are in there.

I will be free soon and be able to live the life I've been waiting to live for two years.

Thank you for making me more appreciative of my situation.

Sincerely,

**A. F.**

To start off, I want to thank you guys for writing us back. It means a lot to us, the kids at Miami Youth Academy. When we get these letters, it shows us that prison isn't the place to be.

Most of the letters we get from you guys show us the real world – that doing a crime is bad and we need to stop doing bad things.

We appreciate your honest statements, which make us think.

Sincerely,

**I. C.**

Wassup? I hope you are OK and thanks for your input.

I will never come to prison. I will pray for you and your family. It seems like you're in a horrible predicament, so you need to try to get home and see your family at some point.

I want you to know that I will take your advice and stay out of prison.

Sincerely,

**C. E.**

Thank you for taking your time to write a letter to us and try to persuade us to go onto a better path.

It really did inspire me, hearing your story and getting an understanding of how it is to live there.

I never plan to get arrested again or do anything illegal.

I plan to go to college, get a job, take care of my family as they do for me, and to be a role model for my little siblings, as they are still growing up and influenced by what I do.

Sincerely,

**J. S.**