

Titan Tribune

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Mural unleashes our creative spirit

By M P

We did the mural because we wanted to try something new and find a different way to express ourselves.

It was a very special, enlightening experience because all of us figured we were bad at art and only creative with lyrics. But when we put the brush to the canvas, it's like it triggered endorphins in our brains and God struck us with the creative spirit.

Now, I know you're wondering how exactly we painted this mural.

Well, first we painted a back-splash on the wall. It was a light blue-turquoise color. We learned that you have to fill in the cracks of the wall for the color to look good from afar and blend into the wall.

Second, we had a workshop about what it means to be young kings in our community and what it takes for us to make a change.

Third, we started sketching the designs that are on the wall and brainstorming about what the wall means to us. What kind of message did we want to portray?

We decided that the outside of the mural would represent challenges that we have faced as young men coming up in the community. The inside is all our goals and dreams.

This entire project took six days to complete and was done by about a half-dozen of us.



Bridges project combines teamwork and creativity

By A G and M G

MYA teacher Jesus Gonzalez supervised the bridge project. Following is an interview with Mr. Gonzalez.

(Q) What part of the project do you like best?

(A) It's fun to see the youth build the bridges using their creativity.

(Q) What bridge did you like the most and why?

(A) The red bridge because they used a lot of triangles.

(Q) Did you think the youth liked this project?

(A) I think they did. I think all of the youth learned something.

(Q) What is the goal of this contest?

(A) The goal of the contest was to learn about triangles and how to use them in bridges and buildings. It's important to know about triangles because they are the strongest shape to use when you are building something. They distribute all the forces evenly.

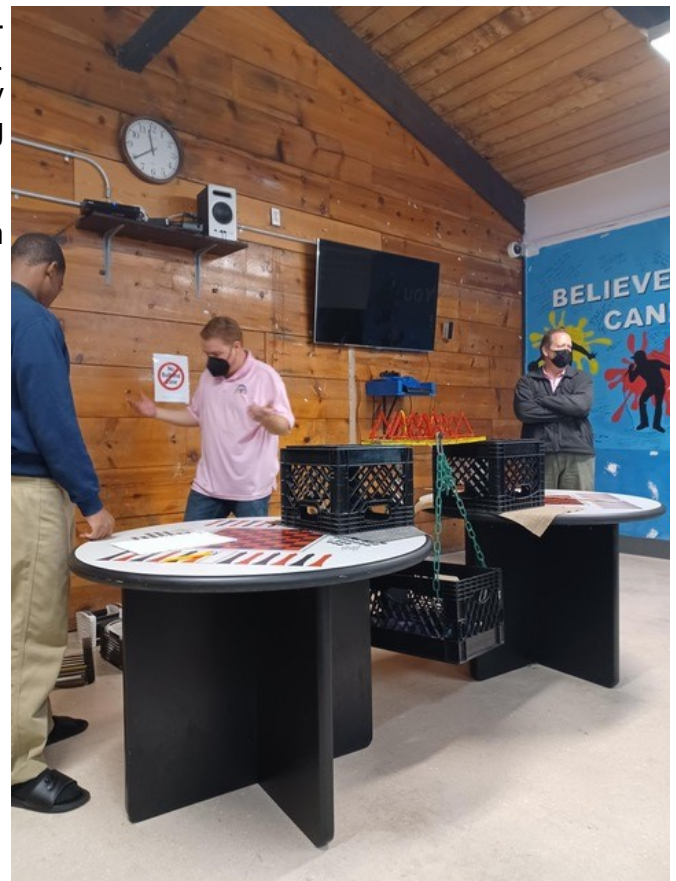
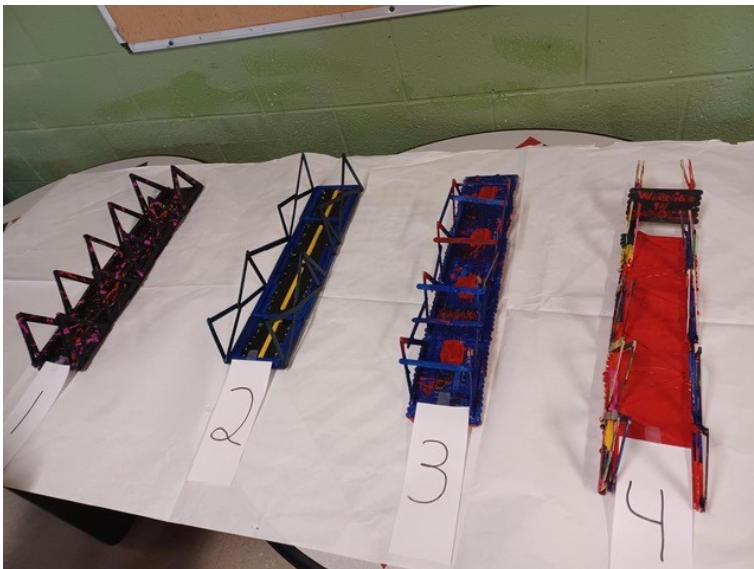
(Q) What kind of awards are there for the winners?

(A) The youth win Chinese food and the satisfaction of coming in first.

Winners

For Strength (building the bridge that held the most weight) – D L, V B and D R.

For Aesthetics – A G, M J, J D and L J.

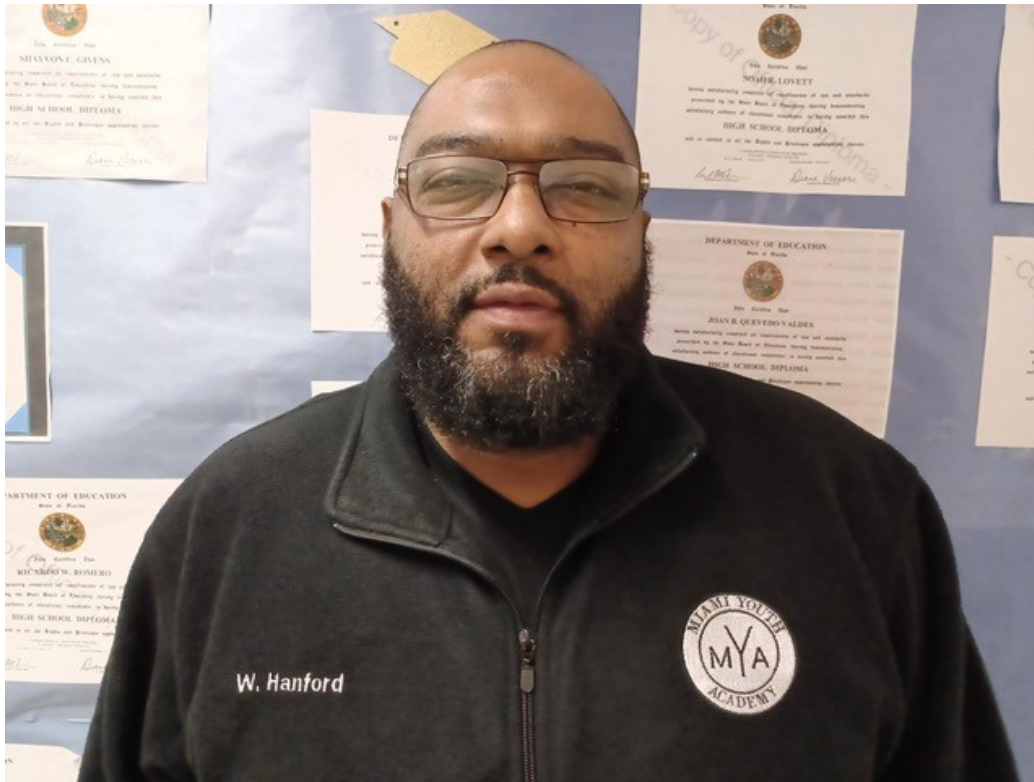


WELCOME

This is the 15th 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 the 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 Henry Unger, an Exchange for Change volunteer. He is assisted by MYA teacher Jesus Gonzalez. The paper's layout and design were done by Miami-Dade teacher Daniel Wynne.



Facility Administrator William Hanford finds working with teenagers fulfilling

By T S and D R

Q: Where are you from?

A: A small town called Belle Glade, Florida.

Q: How do you like running MYA?

A: I like it a lot. There is a group of young men who seem to be determined to buy into the program, such as giving their fullest effort, so they return to their loved ones.

Q: Why did you choose to work in this field?

A: I initially started with the adults in the prison system, where I worked for 10 years. Then I had a career change and started working with juveniles. I found the juveniles to be more fulfilling.

Q: What are your goals at MYA?

A: My goal is to promote teamwork and unity, and ensure that all the departments are working together to provide the best service to our youth.

Q: What is the toughest part of your job?

A: It is preparing the youth to return back to their community and later discovering that one of them reoffended. I have come to understand that no matter how well they are prepared in this program, their outside environment – and whether they get a lot of support -- is a big factor.

Q: What type of kid were you?

A: I was an active kid involved in sports, but I also had problems controlling my anger. But it was not enough to get in trouble and go to a program.

Q: What do you plan to do when you retire?

A: I plan to relax and do my hobby, which is basketball. I love working with kids, so maybe I'll give coaching a try.

Ms. Sanchez's father taught her important lesson from his youth

By T H

Q: Who was an influential person in your life?

A: I would say my father was the biggest influence of my life because he was very supportive and helped me develop a strong determination and drive. For instance, in high school I made the swimming team and my father was very proud of me.

He's from Cuba. He went to a residential military school when he was 8. He didn't speak much English and they thought he was dumb, so they put him in a corner with a Dunce Cap on, which is a paper cone put on your head to insult you and say you're stupid. At that time, he vowed he would learn English and never be put into that situation again.

He taught me the importance of learning language well and overcoming adversity.

Also, my mother was a big influence in my life because that's where I got my love for food. Ever since I was young, because of her, I've been in the kitchen.

Q: Did you get into trouble as a kid?

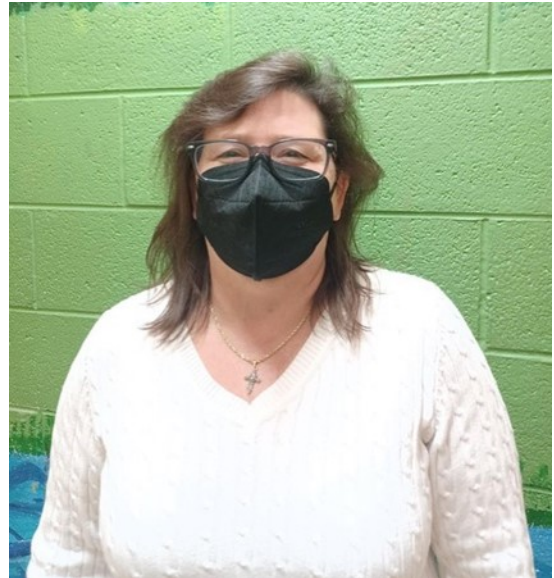
A: No, I was actually an A and B student. I didn't have any trouble with the law.

Q: Why do you teach the SafeStaff certificate course, which is needed by workers involved in the food industry?

A: So that when kids go to get a job in the food business, they will have an advantage, because the business will not have to go through the process of getting them the certification.

Q: What are some of the things you teach the kids in the course?

A: Food-borne illnesses, time and temperature control, and cross contamination.



Ms. Deborah Sanchez

Q: What is your background in the catering business?

A: After high school, I went to college and studied culinary arts. I met a couple who owned a catering business and I joined them. It was good because they had experience and I learned a lot from them.

Q: What are some of the things you teach the students to make?

A: One of the things is cookies, which I think is important because we use a lot of measuring tools and techniques. When there is a family day, the administrative assistant picks a theme. We do our best and make food to go with the theme she picks.

Q: How much experience do you have with SafeStaff?

A: I've been teaching it since I was 20 years old.

Q: Why is it important to follow the SafeStaff rules?

A: Because food impacts a lot of people and it can be dangerous if the food is contaminated or if the food is not cooked to the right temperature.

One important thing I learned recently

By J C

Our teacher, Mr. Rudd, told us that “life is 10 percent what happens to you and 90 percent how you react to it.”

This idea is important to me. In the past, every time I thought life was unfair, I never really questioned myself about how I would respond to it.

Now, moving forward, I will try to do that. I will try to be optimistic even when it's hard to do. That's one way to make progress in life.

By B R

I learned not to follow the wrong people. If I had avoided that before, I would not be here now. Instead, I would be in the fresh air, doing what I want to do.

To be honest, I've noticed while I've been in here that I don't have to impress anyone, but the man up top. God really is the one I need to focus on because I need to walk on the right path when I get out.

I know I want to be a changed man. I want to be a better person to all, not to some, because God doesn't give out a lot of second chances. My pop passed away when I was young, so I had to do everything by myself, and that hurt.

Now, my main plan is to earn more school credits while I'm in here so I can make progress and get put in the right grade. I need to do the right thing and not make time for things that take away from my focus.

I want to get my SafeStaff food-handling certificate and make plans for a bright future, maybe in business management or as an athlete.

I want to get out and get back to my little sister and my mom. That is very important to me.

By T H

One thing I learned was that sometimes in life you have to give up the upper hand.

If you always have the upper hand, then you feel like you're entitled.

But given where I am now, I do not have the upper hand.

Also, when someone says something you don't like, you have to let it blow like a kite in the wind. I learned this from my dad. He once told me, “You're always going to have someone over you in life”.

In the end, you just have to do the right thing, whether you have the upper hand or not.

M J celebrates graduation



Class on developing Microsoft skills will help us

By T H

When I first heard that I'm going somewhere to learn about computers I thought – why me, why did they have to pick me?

But after going to the class for the first time I realized that computers are really important things to know about. In the class, you learn about the basics of computers, Internet skills and other programs that are important for your future and in the workplace.

We then take an assessment on the subjects we are taught. If you pass with an 85 percent or higher, you can get a certification for that particular skill.

I have learned a lot. It has been a great experience and the best part is that it's not over.



Therapist Ashley Lewis is a people person

By O W

(Q) Why did you want to work at this program?

(A) I like to meet new people and talk with them.

(Q) What do you like and dislike about your job?

(A) I like it when everybody is having fun and laughing, including my coworkers. I don't like seeing other people being disrespected.

(Q) How long have you been a therapist?

(A) 10 years.

(Q) Where are you from?

(A) Miami but my family is from Cuba and Great Britain.

(Q) How long do you plan on working here?

(A) For as long as I can keep my job.

(Q) What was your previous job and what was your first job?

(A) I worked at a girl's program in Tampa. My first job was at the Olive Garden restaurant.

(Q) Where did you go to college?

(A) The University of Florida.

(Q) Why did you want to be a therapist?

(A) Because I like talking to people.

(Q) What was your childhood like? Did you get in trouble as a kid?

(A) I spent a lot of time outside. I would get in trouble for talking too much in school.

Hope For Miami prepares students for future

Crystal Harley of the Hope for Miami program helps us get better prepared for life by teaching us more about social relationships and managing money. The goal is for us to develop better insights and smarter habits. Following is an interview with Ms. Harley.

By J D and C L

Q: Has life ever been a struggle for you?

A: Yes because I was trying to be different to find myself.

Q: What college you did you go to?

A: FAMU, which stands for Florida A&M University.

Q: How long have you been in Hope for Miami ?

A: I've worked for Hope for Miami for 3 years.

Q: How was your childhood ? Did you get into trouble ?

A: I got in a lot of trouble because of my community.

Q: What are your goals in life ?

A: To get married and become a parent and create an organization for young girls who live in the inner city.

Q: Who is the most important person in your life ?

A: My parents are the most important because they're motivating.

Q: Who can you trust in life ?

A: I can trust my sister because she's always there and she gives good advice.

Q: Do you want to run a business ?

A: Yes a nonprofit organization.

Q: Do you look up to someone ?

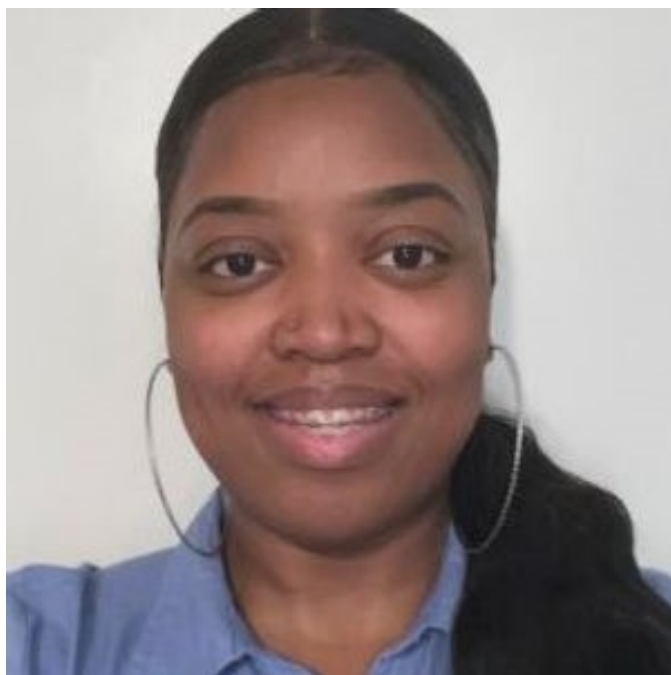
A: Yes, my older siblings.

Q: What is your hobby?

A: I love doing makeup.

Q: What is your coping skill ?

A: Spending time with people I care about.



MYA Letter Exchange with San Quentin

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

Below are two recent letters from San Quentin and some of the student replies.

By Marcus "Wali" Henderson

First, let me say thank you all for your letters. Your words touch us as much as you appreciate our letters. Secondly, I want to apologize to you all for my role in perpetuating violence and for my support for hustling in our culture. As an "OG" [original gangster] I fell into the traps of street life too. I ignorantly believed that this is how things should be.

We all witness bad examples of how we thought we should live our lives when we were on the "block." Who is the coolest? Who is the hardest [toughest]? or Who has the most money? It doesn't matter if it is from California to Florida, it's all the same. We have been maintaining a culture of despair and violence. I am truly heartbroken by the senseless murder of rapper Takeoff, of the group Amigos.

Most of us incarcerated know the "life" which falsely consist of money, cars, girls and O' God don't forget the "beefs." I am sad to see us caught-up in situations where we think the only way for us to solve a problem is through violence or making money is through hustling. I received over 50 years to life for this way of thinking.

A lot of people in society may never truly understand what it means for us to be young and inexperience and trying to navigate a hash and aggressive environment. But I want to encourage you to have the courage to be the best you, no matter what anyone thinks. You are worthy to live a crime free life.

You don't have to follow the crowd. Invest in yourself—your health, both physically and mentally. Invest in your family; be a support network for their challenges and their dreams. Invest in your community give of your time and spirit. When times get tough find the right people to lean on.

Finally, I see a lot of you want to know what we do in prison all day. I going to say this it is probably not to different from what you guys do. Some people are just hanging out doing nothing but playing games all day (cards, chess, dominoes, video games). They are just going through the motions of doing time and not preparing for success.

You also have those who work-out all day, but do not feed their minds (read). You even have those who stay in the law library all day hoping for any law that may get them free. The main thing to know to survive life inside or on the streets—you must have a "Purpose." You must give your life "Purpose."

MYA Students Reply

Dear Wali,

I want to thank you for your letter.

Now a little bit about me -- I have been at Miami Youth Academy for eight months and locked up nine. I was arrested for grand theft auto. I am going to be leaving on the 31st of January.

Now that I have met you a little, from inmate to inmate I feel where you are coming from. All I can say is that you have to think positively and positive things will come.

Every time I used to go outside, I would work out, play sports, etc. Now when I go outside, I try to clear my mind by looking at trees, birds, flowers and clouds. People might say I'm tripping but just let them say or think that. Just think how it feels to be in a bird's body. You would be free. I know we can't physically be free, but our mental state of mind can.

I know that based on your message to us you received 50 to life. All I can say is to stay strong and don't let people get into your head. Once you let them in, most of the time they don't leave.

We all have our problems, but that doesn't mean we should let anyone use us as an emotional punching bag. You feel me?

I'm going to try to be the best version of myself and I know you are also trying.

From cell to cell, yours truly,

T H

Hi Wali,

Thank you for writing to us. I appreciate it.

I have some questions. For example, I read in your letter about money, cars, women and beef. First of all, if there weren't good and bad money in the world, a lot of people would be savages because money turns people against their loved ones, friends and even God.

I think we need to need understand that money isn't the only way you're going to turn on people. Money just makes it worse and gets you in more trouble.

I've been in the Department of Juvenile Justice for the past three years going through stuff. My pops passed away when I was little and I had to move with my mom. I didn't want to live off my mother, so I started car hopping to get money to live my thriller life.

Did I really have to do that? I feel like if I still had my father I probably wouldn't have. My mother told me every day I went out of her house that she knew what I was doing out there. She would talk me to death about how I could get killed. Like you said in your letter, you felt in the street trap. I felt the same way, to be honest.

I was already deep in the trap. I really tried to get out of it but the more I tried, the more I got into it. I felt like just giving up on life, as I went in and out of DJJ.

I did stuff young men are not supposed to at my age. I have shot at people, robbed people, been in a high-speed chase, and other things. I couldn't get right. At 18, I could have been dead. But my God had better plans in mind. This program really saved me.

I know where you're at is worse than here. I know y'all are fighting for your lives and have to defend yourselves. I'm really scared to end up there. That's why every night I pray for y'all. Don't give up because that makes you feel alone. I know, I have done that many times. I have to keep pushing myself, so I expect you to do the same. Through Christ, anything is possible. God has stuff planned for all of us.

My next question is do you have any advice for me on goals or things you have been through that are similar? My date of release is June 8, 2023.

Nice talking with you, Wali. Thank you.

Sincerely,

B R

Hi Wali,

I've been locked up almost six months, but I've only been in this program for three months.

I really appreciate you for even reading my letter.

I'm very young and well respected in my area. I'm a YZ (Young Zuperior), which means I come from Haitian descent. It's like I've been born into this lifestyle. I feel like I'm too deep in the streets to even think about leaving them.

When I was younger, I used to break and enter vehicles until I realized the money wasn't fast enough for such a high risk. Knowing that, I started selling drugs. At first, most of my older cousins

sold them, so I had better prices than my peers. Money came fast, but so did jealousy. Also, I used to break into cars.

How about you? How are you doing? Were you locked up when you were young? Did your family or neighborhood push you in that direction?

What advice would you give for in here and for when I get out in a couple of months?

Thank you and take care of yourself.

Sincerely,

J C

Second San Quentin letter

I received your letter this week; it was good to hear from you. I read your letter very carefully; you present yourself to be very intelligent. You know how to express what type of problems you are facing. Therefore, I believe you have the potential to be a better person. I noticed two things that you are dealing with, anger and entitlement. In this letter, I will talk about anger, and then we will go from there.

I dealt with anger most of my life inside and outside of prison. I was mistreated growing up, I received whippings from my Mom, and I was bullied because I was small. When I got older, and bigger I started fighting, skipping school, stealing, and drinking alcohol. I dealt with impulsivity most of my life, when I got angry I would explode, especially when I was in close proximity of people that agitated me. I did not trust people outside of my circle. If I thought someone presented a threat to me, they could not come within an arms reach, even if they were not a threat. The same thing that was done to me I did to others, the bullied became the bully.

Anger is a feeling that triggers underlying problems that we sometimes know nothing about. Anger makes us weak, because our actions and emotions are out of control when we got mad. We cannot avoid anger, but we can avoid the destructive behavior that derives from it.

Honesty and the support of others helped me realize the source of my anger, with that knowledge of self I began to turn things around before I exploded. I would stop and observe what is exactly taking place. I would immediately start thinking about what is the source of it. I ask myself is this the same source that has made me angry in the past. Nobody has to know when we are processing our emotions, because our business is nobody's business. The key is for us to stop and think before acting out. We should ask ourselves is acting out worth being in jail or prison. I think you are well capable of self-realization, if I believed you were not I would say so.

J.D. give your self a chance to become a better person, it will take a better person to be in a better place. I have spent 27 years in prison, because of my own issues with anger. I wish what I know now, I knew before prison. I hope to hear from you soon, take care of yourself.

Peace
Maleek

MYA students reply

Dear Maleek,

This is my first letter to you but I read the letter you just recently sent and saw that you've spent 27 years in prison. I just want to know how you cope with the time because I've only been locked up for six months and it's hard for me.

I still need to improve my behavior so I can be on the right track and go home to my family. I've been on this thing called level freeze, where I can't level up, which I need to do so I can go home. That's my goal.

The reason I'm in here is because I was stealing cars, breaking into houses, selling drugs, fighting and robbing people. I even dropped out of school

but now I'm trying to get my GED in here. I'm going to get a job when I get out of this place and try to do better for me and my family.

I've also been trying to control my language and my outbursts. I've been told by my therapist in here that I need to care about others feelings and show a little more empathy towards others.

If you have any advice that you can give me, I would appreciate it. Thank you.

Sincerely,

J C

Dear Maleek,

Thank you for your advice on controlling anger. As I told you, it's an important problem of mine. I hope I can learn to deal with it better before I get out.

The reason why I'm here is because DCF took me away from my mom because of her boyfriend. He put his hands on my little brothers and I didn't like that. We started to fight. The police came to check up on me because I was on probation. I went to the county jail with my mom's boyfriend, then I got bailed out.

They never told me to go see a judge, so they said I was on the run. I was in a music video store when they caught me with things I should not have had.

I've been in here for seven months and I've been psyched out at times, which causes me to fight or come into conflict with the rules of the program.

Tell me, what is your best advice for me? How do you think I can get better with things?

Sincerely,

J D

M P celebrates graduation

