

# Poetry Behind the Walls

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Volume 3, Issue 1

## About PBW

Poetry Behind the Walls (PBW), is the only ongoing journal in the world that is dedicated to writings from youth that are incarcerated. PBW is a collaborative project between Save the Kids, Le Moyne College's Center for Urban and Regional Applied Research, SUNY Cortland's Criminology Department, the journal *Social Advocacy and Systems Change*, and Hillbrook Youth Detention Center.

## Goal of PBW

The goal of PBW is to provide space for youth to express themselves nonviolently. PBW as well, supports and encourages youth when they see their work published.

## Archives of PBW

Social Advocacy and Systems Change  
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## Acknowledgments

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## Submissions

Poetry Behind the Walls is open to all incarcerated youth throughout the world. We would like all writing to advocate positive expression and hope. It does not matter what kind of writing ability the youth exhibit. Please send submissions via e-mail to: Anthony J. Nocella, II – [anthony.nocella\[at\]cortland.edu](mailto:anthony.nocella[at]cortland.edu) (with the subject title – “Poetry Behind the Walls,” including full contact information, age, facility, and will send you back a contract to fill out).

# **A Life in Hillbrook**

**By: Ronnie**

I wake up in the night,  
Thinking I'm doing everything right  
I drifted back to sleep, only to hear a knock at my door  
1:00 AM, my life in hell started  
By the end of the day, I had been told what to do at least 30 times  
I have no time alone  
The staff thinks I'm one of "them"  
It makes me want to give up on life  
... Here in Hillbrook

# Being a Thug

By: Steven

I used to smoke with my friends and stand on the corner looking like a thug  
I went to school when I felt like going,  
And did stupid things like a thug would do  
I would go home at 3:00 or 4:00 A.M.  
And my family used to tell me to be good in the streets  
But I never listened  
That's why I think I am a thug

# Fly High in the Sky

## By: Stephon

Life on drugs  
I thought I was a thug  
Thinking everything was alright  
Staying out late at night  
Everything I thought was wrong  
Smoking weed all day long  
I thought I was flying high  
'Til crooked cops said "bye"  
Hanging out with straight snitches  
They might get big stitches  
This is why I said "bye"  
To the thugs in the sky

# Love

By: Najah

Love can be fun  
Love can be helpful  
Love can be pain  
Love can be harmful  
A lot of people think they are in love,  
But really, they just have feelings for another person.  
Love is trust, respect and caring  
Love is pain, strong and unselfish  
Love is enjoyable  
Love for me, is hard  
Pain, pain can be stress  
Pain, pain can be trouble  
Pain, pain can be soreness or tenderness  
Pain, pain can be torture and it can be a lot of work  
Regardless where life takes you,  
Remember that if someone loves you-  
They are upset when you're upset  
They're happy when you are happy  
And they will find ways to make you happy when you are in pain  
And share the pain with you

# Out, Now In

## By: Stephon

I was one that loved to hang  
Stayin' out late, playing  
Robbin' people, smiling after  
Running from the cops, high with laughter  
Going to parties that never stop,  
Until the cops came on the block  
Bangin' girls that fight a lot  
These are the things that I have not forgot  
Locked up behind these gates  
Risking time with my fate  
I'll get out soon-  
I promise that.  
This is why I cry  
I won't be late!

# Trying Too Hard

By: Stephon

Tryin'  
Why do I try?  
Tryin' to survive  
Tryin' to stay alive  
Tryin' to be cool  
Why do I try?  
I don't want to cry  
I don't want to say bye  
I don't want to lie  
Why do I try?  
Because it's "cool"  
But I don't want to die  
Why do I try?  
When I know it's wrong  
Staying out all day long  
Why do I try?  
Because I'm a boy

**Why**

**By: Bruce**

Why does the system try to silence my side of the story?

Why can't I get a court date?

Why does the greed always get us caught?

Why do people always resort to violence?

Why did that way of life kill my uncle?

Why can't my pops stop drinking?

Why is my mother sick?

Why did they rob my brother?

Why did Cody get cancer?

Why does every girl always play me for cash?

Why do I keep getting locked up?

When will this end?



# A Life Without You

By: Ronnie

Without you I can't sleep  
I truly can't even think about a life without you  
If you were to die today, it would just take my very life away  
Just thinking about it takes my every breath away  
I think about you night and day  
Sometimes I wonder if you feel the same way  
In the past, I felt different in a way  
I was madly in love with you, my heart was yours  
My mind has searched for a heart other than yours  
Now it aches because I think of a life without you

# **A Moment of Freedom**

**By: Bruce**

As I walk outside, cuffs tight around my wrist  
I talk to the cops and reminisce  
About all the times in a situation like this  
I knew this cop since I was 10 years old  
Before life changed, and my heart turned cold

# Eternity

By: Kristen

Our love is forever  
No matter what they say  
By each other's sides  
Until our dying day  
Words aren't enough  
To prove you all my love  
So baby when you read this  
Try to stay tough  
I know we're locked up  
And we can't be together  
But remember what I've said  
Our love is forever

# Going Home

By: Steven

I want to go home,  
But I'm not,  
But it's all good  
Because I could've been shot,  
But making stupid decisions gets people locked up  
When I go home,  
I'm going to do good things  
But let's see if I can  
I hope I can  
I miss home a lot but I've got to do good to get out.

# Hillbrook

By: Robert

The razor wire won't let me out  
I can't handle it, I need to get out  
I feel like a dog locked in a cage  
The barbed wire just builds up my rage  
The food is sick, you can't eat it  
And if you do:  
You might just swell up, black and blue

# Hillbrook Life

By: Kristen

The days in here seem so long  
But it's my fault for doing it wrong  
Got caught red handed, for sure I was done  
The cops were happy to say they've won  
Shackles and cuffs aren't any fun  
Especially when you want to run  
The fencing and barbed wire is what keeps us in  
Soon I will be free and never see this again

# Life Consequences

By: Alex

Baby, I'm truly sorry for what I've done  
Now I'm facing the consequences and it's not so fun  
Like they say, you never realize what you've got 'til it's gone  
That's true for me, baby, and I know I've done wrong  
'Cause believe me when I tell you, I need you with me to live  
Baby, you're the only one that I need  
I promise, when I get out that I'll follow my deed-  
Of being a father 'cause I planted the seed  
And if you want me baby, I'll stop with the weed  
All I want is for us to be together  
'Cause I already know that I'll love you forever  
And while I'm locked up, everyday I'll write you a letter  
And hope when I get out my life will be better  
'Cause I can't live this way anymore, my life is hell  
The only place it's gotten me, is sitting in a cell  
And I can't go to sleep, 'cause I keep worrying: "Is my son well?"  
I want you to know you're the best son I could ever have  
I know you're probably mad, and that truly makes me sad  
But I promise when I get out I'll be the greatest dad  
We'll go the mall and I'll buy you anything you want,  
I would even get you the world's biggest robot  
One thing I ask god for everyday:  
Is to watch over you and make sure you're okay  
When night comes, I make sure I pray

'Cause I always have something to say  
And on the real, no one can take my baby  
'Cause I'm a gentleman and she is a lady  
She would never make me go crazy  
Just sit back and get a little wavy  
And still see a beautiful girl when your eyes get hazy  
And if she wants to get married, it's a "yes", not a "maybe"



# Locked Up

By: Kristen

Locked up like animals for doing different crimes  
We all got smacked with doing some time  
Runnin' the streets, selling drugs, making money  
The law doesn't seem to find it funny  
We get placed for trying to stay safe  
Can't fight back or you will get maced  
Do your best trying to get dough  
Not trying to be bad, but they still label us low  
Someday they'll forgive us and let us all out  
But until that day I'll be locked up, no doubt

# Life of a Soul Survivor

By: Ronnie

I wake up thinking life would get better  
I dream that race didn't matter  
I remember when I was young, my dreams didn't matter  
Now money is my life,  
So I have to fight to stay alive another night  
And think about what's next, and what's best and what's right  
In spite of all this, I survive another night  
You never know what's next in the life of a soul survivor

# Where I Went Wrong

By: Ronnie

I went wrong when drugs came into my life  
My life got harder, but I didn't get any farther  
And my mother made it harder  
She made it harder to trust, harder to believe,  
And even harder to remember her face  
So, I solved my problems with drugs and other bad things  
I even have a tattoo that shows that she stabbed me in the heart  
It has been bleeding since the day I was born  
Yet, I'm still alive

**Why?**

**By: Ronnie**

Why do the people die?

Young and old-

The world's so cold

Why do people kill each other?

Black, White, Cuban, or Mexican

We should stick together

Why must people lie?

Because of it, people die

Why is it so hard to get by?

Life is just a lie

Why be a thug if you can't hug your mom?

Sweat running down your palms

Why do you bid if you could be at your crib?

And that's why I'm here doing a bid

# The Way the World Turns

By: Ronnie

It spins, it turns, but you never learn  
The way it turns, it will make you burn  
One minute it's hot, then it's cold  
Young and old, the world will be cold  
If the world really turns  
Why do we stand so firm?  
That's just the way the world turns

**Short Stories...**

# Untitled

By: Bruce

My name is Bruce and I'm 16 years old. I'm currently in a New York youth detention facility. I've been here 6 months awaiting a court date for first degree assault. At this time, I'd rather not talk about my case because it could be used against me in the court of law.

I've been in and out of the system 4 times since I was 12 years old. My family was hell. They tried their best, but they were heavily involved in the world of drugs and alcohol. These abuses led the family to daily domestic violence, where I've been stuck in the middle. This led me out the door and onto the streets, filled with anger and hate: the two ingredients to join gang activity. It's not like I wanted to, but there was nothing else in my community to do.

I've never been good at sports, I'm more of an intellectual type of person, but that's a dilemma where I live. The only place for that is up the hill at the University, but they do not want us townies on their campus. They view us as that townies, people that are not members of the University, and when we are on the campus hanging out we are held or chased off the campus by public safety. There is a clear separation between us and them, they do not like us, and we do not like them, but we need them for money and they know it. They look at us like we are worthless and not going anywhere. They speak about community involvement, but they don't want us involved. The University is an elitist place full of people that don't care about the community, but rather want to make money and make sure I do not get in the way of that, unless they are looking for drugs. This story can be seen and is played out in many small town, and not just mine.

# Suggestions to a Younger Brother

By: Alex

I am 15 years old and have been in and out of the system for about 5 years. As I write this, I am currently locked up in a New York state detention facility. I don't want to talk about my past too much, but I have been arrested numerous times for multiple different things from selling drugs to robbing corner stores. I have seen and done a lot a lot of things, but through all of my experiences, I have learned a lot of lessons.

The most important lesson is that money should be made legally, because once you start making money illegally, it's very hard to stop. For example: My father lost his life because he sold drugs. He left my mother and I when I was 3 weeks old because he wasn't man enough to take care of his responsibilities. As a result of this, I grew up with no real father figure. The only father figures I've ever had were the people in my set and in my hood, but all they taught me was how to sell drugs and rob people. This is all I know how to do.

I have never been one of those people with money who have both parents taking care of them and loving them. This has always been, (and still is) my dream. I have a 2 year old son, and another one on the way and I don't even know how to fully take care of myself. The last thing I want is my children growing up with no father the same way I did, because I know exactly how it feels to be in this world without anyone to show you the right way to live.

Since 8 years old, I have been trying to take care of myself by selling drugs. I've been stabbed, robbed and thrown in and out of detention centers. My life has not been easy. Now I'm facing time, and hope that people who read this will realize that this is no way to live. Enjoy life, because you only have one.



# No More Searching

By: Robin

My name is Robin and I'm currently locked up in a youth detention facility. I have seen and done some stupid things in my life. My first time getting arrested was when I was 13 years old and I've been in and out of detention facilities about 8 times. I've been in a lot of trouble in these facilities and have had to be restrained or put in my room multiple times.

It's not very fun being in a youth detention facility. You are always told what to do and when to do it. You are behind locked doors all day and here there is no freedom whatsoever. When you are in a detention facility you have to be searched every time you leave the building. It's very humiliating, because you have to take off all of your clothes and let somebody else look at your naked body.

A detention facility is not a place for anyone to be. The best way to stay out is to have a loving family, live in a nonviolent community, choose good friends, and stay drug-free.

# My Life

## By: Ronnie

My name is Ronnie and I was born in Tampa, Florida on July 20th 1994. My dad and my youngest blood sister lived in New York and I lived with my mother because my parents were separated.

When I was 3 months old, my dad came back to Florida to get me. He wanted his only son to be with him. Soon after, my mom remarried and that's when the battle started between them. The judge ordered that my sister and I should stay together, so my dad took us to New York with him. I didn't realize it at the time, but my life would never be normal again.

For the first 3 years in New York, I would visit my mom and call her often. My mom had 2 more kids and soon after that, she stopped calling and we stopped visiting. I was 5 or 6 years old at the time. My sister and I didn't understand why my mom didn't love us anymore. My dad always reassured us that she did.

Around 8 years of age, I started to understand why things happened the way they did. My life was pretty simple. My dad had a job and sold drugs on the side. He sold drugs so that he could afford all of the extra things that we wanted. My sister and I got pretty much everything we ever wanted. For at least 5 years we lived the dream life, until the night that daddy didn't come home.

That night, we heard people outside the house and saw flash lights. We knew that our dad was in trouble. The voices outside came closer and closer until there was a knock at the door. I asked, "Who's there?" and they responded that they were the police. They came in and raided the house. I was 11 years old when I watched them rip my house apart. I remember tears starting to fall down the sides of my face. They found all of his money, but no drugs. They even found the jar hidden in my bed room with my sister's and my own Christmas money, and other money that we had saved for the things we wanted. I think there was over a thousand dollars in that jar. My dad was sentenced to 8 months in county jail and my

sister and I moved into my grandma's. My life started going downhill after that.

After moving in with my grandmother, I started smoking weed and cigarettes. In school, I would get into fights almost every day. Around the same time, my grandma began telling me that my dad wasn't my real father, so I stopped writing him

On my 12th birthday, my dad was released from jail, but my life was still different. My sister and I moved back in with him, but I was still upset because I didn't know whether my dad was my dad or not. We ended up getting a DNA test, and it did show that he was my father.

Around the age of 12, I completed my first robbery and started selling drugs. I ditched my old friends and started hanging out with an older crowd. I was one of the popular weed dealers in town, because I knew all of the people to get it from. 3 years later, I was still robbing drug dealers and selling weed. I was kind of rich before I had to go to Hillbrook.

I've had what some people would call a hard life. I've learned that drugs ruin families. My dad used to sell drugs when we were younger, but because of drugs, I had to live with my grandmother while my father was in jail. I've learned that I don't want to live a thug's life, and that the only person that can change my life is me. It took me 14 years to figure out that I have to cut the harmful people and things out of my life.

# It Starts at Home

By: Stephon

Home, (for many kids) is a place of peace, safety, shelter, love, and food. For me, home was a roller coaster. It was hell sometimes, but at other times it was great. I grew up with my mom and dad yelling and fighting with each other. I couldn't stand it. Every time they got into it, my siblings and I took off. We just couldn't take it. Their fighting landed them in trouble for a while. When that happened I would stay with my sister and aunt. While some of my sisters stayed out of trouble and at my aunt's house a lot, my brother and I took out our anger negatively. We smoked a lot, robbed people and got into fights. My brother was older than me and I looked up to him. Everything he did, I did. I followed his every foot-step. When he got in jail, I got arrested and thrown into jail as well.

Today, I am in detention and waiting to be placed for a crime I have been convicted of. Even though I did the crime, I've learned that what I did to others was completely wrong. I think it is important for others, (specifically judges, lawyers, professors and other experts) to know that I had a hard life growing up and I did what I had to do to survive. My life is not pretty or something that someone should want. I wish I didn't follow my brother and stuck with the right friends. I wish that my mom and dad didn't fight, but this was my life and I had to deal with it.

Being locked up, and now looking at 3 to 4 years, I am stressed. I could have been doing a year before hanging out with certain friends, and now I'm doing more time. I have to deal with the people and staff here. The schooling system is different here because outside I'm in the 10th grade, but in here I am in the 6th- 8th grade. The kids here are just like me. Some are here for stuff they did not do, and some are here for cruel stuff, but we are all kids going down the wrong road. This place is nothing like I imagined. The food is nasty, and the clothes I wear one day are the same clothes that another kid wore the day before. This place is wrong, but life is life.

When I get out, I have to change or I'll end up in an even worse facility than the one I'm in right now. Regardless, it will be a place I don't want to be.

# Beating My Way Through the System

By: William

My name is William and I am 15 years old. Currently, as I write this I am behind the walls of a New York detention facility. This is my 9th or 10th time thrown in jail, (not to brag or show off). I even did a year in a non-secure facility, where I almost did another because the police didn't want me out.

The 1st time I got caught, I was only 12 years old and it was one of the worst moments of my life. I was selling weed by myself on the corner. I walked into a store to sell someone some weed and I was spotted by a detective that wasn't wearing a uniform. I saw him, and ran out of the store and up the street. It felt like I was jumping fences for forever. I thought I finally lost him, so I slowed down and began walking. All of a sudden, he came out of nowhere, and behind me were a bunch of police officers. I was cornered. They grabbed me, handcuffed me, and threw me in the wagon. I was taken to the police station, where they searched me, processed me, and found the marijuana that I had been selling. They booked me and put me in a car to be moved to a youth facility.

As they were driving me to the youth facility, they took a detour off the road and into a dark alley. They parked the car and dragged me out and began yelling at me that I had hurt them by making them chase me through the fences. They proceeded to take out their flashlights and clubs and beat me with them for approximately 5 minutes, but it felt like an eternity. I ended up trying to fight back out of self defense and I kicked one of the officers in the face. After they were done, they threw me back in the car and dropped me off at the detention facility with lumps all over my body.

I've learned that this is the life of a black male. This story is not unique or rare in America. I wish it was, but it seems that I am part of a group of people with a similar story that is never told. I guess that is why I am writing right now. I feel as though the system isn't right... it's broken. Kids should not be on the streets. They should stay in school, play sports and keep busy. They shouldn't

sell drugs, but they should get a job instead, (like landscaping or shoveling snow). They should keep their heads up and stay safe.