

# TWO ROADS

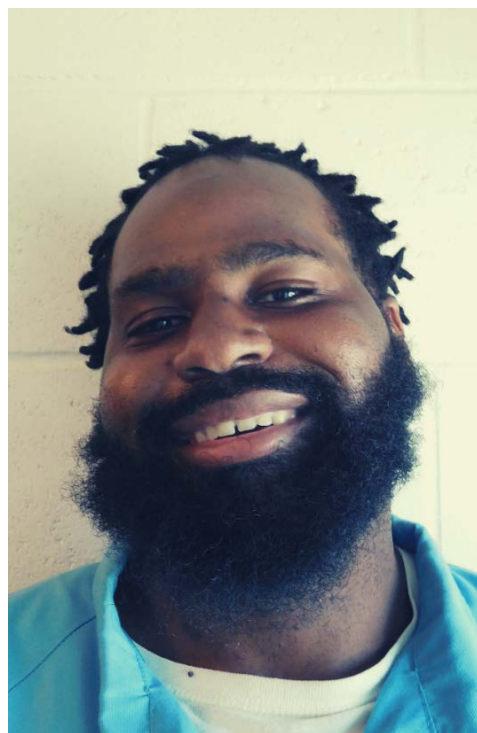


## **Black History Month**

Our writers draw upon their experiences as incarcerated citizens to reflect on what it means to be Black in our time and this place.

We chronicle the stories and service of the incarcerated men and women of the Illinois Department of Corrections.

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**BLACK  
HISTORY  
MONTH**

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**Two  
Roads**



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# PUBLISHER'S LETTER

JIM ESTES

I'm compelled as the publisher of this magazine and as a person who gives thought to problems to try and find my place in the Black History Month concept.

I've been reading Terrance Hayes' *"American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin."* He's a poet who writes about the experience of black people in America. He also work-shopped a creative writing program for prisons and homeless shelters in Washington D.C. This man carries the fire. His fire lit my path to understanding the meaning of Black History Month, of resilience and of strong people writing new stories for their lives.

Terrance Hayes asked, "Can you remember the womb? How, in the moments before birth, the lines were washed from the map that told the route you'd come?"

Well, I don't remember, not in a literal way, which I suppose is Hayes' point. He's not the first to try and describe the idea we came from somewhere else, and were great and beautiful before we were born. And that to live our humble, complicated lives we must first be born as an innocent, with the lines from the map that told the route we'd come cleanly washed away.

Life then does its work and writes new lines, draws a new map on us that tells the story of where we've been and the limited places for which our life now has roads.

If we were born poor, or a woman, or with a soul singing to a less common faith, a skin hueing to a less common color, a life flattening from unjust force, our roads become harder and our places fewer.

The new lines on our map tell us where to go, but they don't tell us who we are.

They can't. Because we remember. The lines were washed from the map of the route we'd come at our birth. But we remember.

We were great and beautiful once. We still are.

This month, Black History Month, a 28 day reflection of the resiliency, promise and strength of Black people, reminds me, a white man, of who we all were before our lines were washed and rewritten.



# EDITOR'S LETTER

RICKY HAMILTON

Greetings everyone, I am glad to be back with you all for the second volume of our Race Issue. We simply had to do all that we could to allow for more of your voices to be heard. I hope you all enjoy this issue as much as our first. Our first volume on Race received much praise and support from people inside, as well as those in the community. It was the first issue of ours to make it out for public consumption, so we are very proud it was an issue filled with so many powerful stories from all over the IDOC.

This current issue was meant to come out months ago, but since it is being released at this time, we simply couldn't fail to acknowledge Black History Month. I personally would like to dedicate this month to all the strong, brave, courageous, beautiful Black Women making history by saving the world, such as Ms. Stacey Abrams. I do not subscribe to any political party, nor do I care much for national politics. What I do subscribe to is people who know how to

overcome adversity and fight for what they believe in – the right way.

Something very important I've learned over the years is that success leaves clues. So, when I study the world, I look for these clues in different places.

Year 2020 (AKA Year Cray-Cray!) revealed to me how essential resiliency is in the overcoming of true challenges, yet what capped off this lesson of the year was my awareness of the journey and efforts of Ms. Abrams. Her loss in the 2018 Georgia governor's race did not end in defeat, but rather it was simply the start of her building something amazing; she put her head down and went to work. Ms. Abrams is showing that Black History is being made every day by being the human embodiment of resiliency. We all can learn from this beautiful black woman in how to turn a seeming failure into a true American success story.

I would also like to acknowledge some great African-American returning citizens who are

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making Black History today such as Desmonde Meade and Chris Wilson. Both of these brothers wrote books: *Let My People Vote* and *The Master Plan*, where they tell their journeys from incarceration to success beyond prison.

Anyone who is incarcerated absolutely needs to read these books and learn from them.

Remember: *Success Leaves Clues*, so study to show thyself approved, and before you know it, the time will come where opportunity meets preparation and it will be your time to shine. This prison experience can be the making of an amazing comeback story for us all; the essential thing we must do is remain resilient, learn from our mistakes, failures and misfortunes, then channel it all into something positive. Our story is ours to write.

During our interview with Director Jeffreys last month, he was very excited to share his thoughts on portions of the criminal justice reform bill passed by both state houses last month. He was excited about the sections of the bill that fortify the IDOC's new emphasis on case management. House Bill 3653 SA2 allows the IDOC to provide incarcerated citizens more sentence credit for participating in rehabilitative programming. This all lends itself to the creation of a system of incentivized rehabilitation; no longer will it be a system which simply warehouses people, instead, incarcerated individuals will have 'more skin in the game' to take their lives in their own hands.

Unfortunately, this bill did not provide provisions to allow us individuals under Truth-in-Sentencing to earn program credit, but I was heartened to hear the Director's personal support for future legislation which

would allow this. Director Jeffreys spoke specifically about the need for all individuals, especially those in maximum security facilities with say 50-60 years, to be able to earn their way to better opportunities. Director Jeffreys emphasized his belief that everyone should be encouraged and incentivized to take their future and rehabilitation into their own hands.

I can honestly say I am confident those entering the prison system now will have a much easier time than I did, for now it appears as if a system, which encourages growth instead of stymying it, is being put in place. So, stay tuned for more information on this conversation and more in issues to come. Until then I want everyone to remember that History starts today, so how do you want your story to end?

In solidarity,  
Ricky Hamilton  
Editor in Chief



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# SUNDAY

MICHELLE CLOPTON  
DECATUR CC

My personal African American experience is my grandmother, Annie May Shanklin, born October 10, 1909 in Kilmichael, Mississippi, where she picked cotton and learned to clean houses. She married (age 14) my grandfather, Willie Clopton and conceived 12 children. She was an excellent cook, a gardener – growing most of her own vegetables, a caretaker and a God-fearing woman.

Sunday mornings were always like a family get-together. Spread out in the kitchen was a variety of what we call soul food, made from Grandma's assorted recipes, especially her cakes and pies. On holidays, celebrations and family reunions, grandma and her sisters would pray over everything. The atmosphere was mixed with cheers, laughs, cussing over a card game when someone was cheating, and shouts from teenagers and young adults in a softball game. Those days were filled with four generations of close-knit family, plus friends and neighbors.

I always looked forward to those days. It brought me a sense of stability, unity and love. Annie loved her family, and she took good care of us all, even raising up grandchildren. She believed a woman's place was at home, taking care of what was needed. She instilled in us good qualities and home training.

I have a deep respect for grandma because she loved God and brought up her children and some grandchildren in church. After my

grandfather died, she put all her strength into service work, not even marrying again or taking another man. She walked and lived for God. Her actions were what she talked to others about. She was truly an exceptional inspirer and encouraged everyone who came across her path. She wasn't the preachy type; she was a prayer warrior who interceded on behalf of a corrupted world.

My family celebrated her homegoing in 2001; she was 92 years young and left behind her a legacy of beautiful memories that still provide a sense of joy. She is forever missed, but never forgotten!!!

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# MOTHER YORK

MARY HENDERSON

DECATUR CC

In a small town of Mississippi in the early 60's, I had the opportunity to meet and live with the Freedom Riders as they were known then and later became the Non-Violent Movement. Several members of that group stayed with me and my family for a period until the hanging of 4 African Americans in a town a few miles from my home. That was one of the experiences that has been in my memory over the years and still is!

As time passed, and I moved to Chicago, I again experienced the riot in Chicago after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death. Later I had the opportunity to work with the Rev. Jesse Jackson of Operation PUSH, which is still working for the rights of people, not just African Americans, but all people who have been denied their human rights. I also had the honor of working with new mayor of Chicago and Congressman, Danny Davis.

Those are some of my past experiences.

But the one that sticks out in my mind is the Lady Rev. [Consuella] York and the things she did. She never met the Queen of England or had dinner with the President, but she had dinner with the ones society passed aside. The murderers, thieves and others from the lowest part of life to the high and mighty. [She gave them food in the county jail and visited every week, and prison visits twice a month.]

She encouraged mind, body and spirit. She spoke on forgiveness and helped some forgive themselves – even the one who killed her husband. Those that felt they had no life left; she showed the way to a life everlasting in Christ.

To me, she was the top of the line; Cream of the Crop; best of the best, without airs of self-worth – the greatest of experiences for me. To me, she was one of the angels that lived on earth. Rest in peace, Mother York; your history and deeds continue to live today by those who knew you.

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# MY TRUE HERITAGE

TORRANCE BARD

KEWANEE CC

Greetings everyone. Happy Black History Month to all the Men and Women currently incarcerated. It is a great opportunity Two Roads has blessed me with to write an article pertaining to African American Culture. I am overwhelmed with gratitude to share my love for my people and our true history before America.

Growing up on the South-side of Chicago, certain topics weren't discussed in our schools.

My neighborhood was notorious for violence, drugs and gangs, and I envisioned a very different status regarding my culture then.

As an adolescent, certain images stuck with me and left me curious about my culture. I remember my mother had two different types of jewelry charms that fascinated me – one being a Queen Nefertiti charm and the other one in the shape of the continent of Africa. Back then I had no idea how much of a remarkable role those charms would play in my journey to true cultural awareness.

I embarked upon a journey that helped remove me from the confinements of my cell at Illinois River and placed me upon the shores of the land of civilization's origination.

One very intelligent brother I met gave me a one book that changed my perspective of African-American culture forever.

The book was called *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* by Cheikh Anta Diop. This book expresses in depth the history and culture of my people. I was amazed when I learned of the intellectual heights my people achieved in antiquity and the schools of thought that manifested from these contributions.

As I read the text of the book in its entirety, it gave me a new sense of self-awareness and love for my culture like never before. Realizing that we came from Kings and Queens with grandiose civilizations from which foreigners from all around the world came and studied. These foreigners adopted our science and technology from prestigious schools of thought like the ones in Jenna and Timbuktu on the west coast of Africa. This information inspired me tremendously because it dispersed all of the lies I had been overtly and subconsciously assaulted with since I was a child.

Acknowledging those symbols my mother wore as charms makes complete sense to me now. They were not simply a fashion statement back then, but a sense of pride for the achievements of us as a people. I believe that a person must understand what their true legacy is before they can reach their maximum potential in life.

So for me, through research and studying, I was able to discover how priceless my heritage is, and it all started because of a fond memory from my childhood.

Since I have gained this sense of self, I am proud to say I carry myself to a higher degree than I did before my discovery. Through my uncovering knowledge that I was never taught as a child, I now have the legacy of the ancient Egyptians and Moors to pass on to my children and family. Now that pride and legacy will reign true for years and decades to follow.

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# SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND RACE

JOKARI T. MILLER

SHAWNEE C.C.

My name is Jokari Miller. I am 44 years of age, and this is my first time incarcerated. I am a devoted father, family man, a scientist and robotics/AI engineer. I have lived or travelled to many places in and out of the country, and the one thing that remains consistent everywhere is racism. Being born in Chicago and raised in Los Angeles, I took an early interest in science and engineering. I have always experienced discrimination in that “arena”, as I have on some occasions been the only black engineer in the room; and in all of the other instances I have been one of the very few black/brown individuals in the room.

It has been a hurtful experience which, over the years, I have learned to navigate around.

But imagine a young child, not even a teenager yet, who, without resources nor inspiring surroundings, taught myself how to program in 4 different computer languages in the 80's, when computers were not widespread, yet I was constantly doubted.

After winning local science fairs – taking first place 3 years in a row – I got questioned as to whether I was authorized to be in the area at a western regional science fair held at Vandenberg Air Force Base, California. I won 2nd place at only 13 years of age up against older high school students, just minutes after being treated as if I didn't even belong on the property. That consistent discrimination continued throughout my high school years,

until it damaged my self-esteem.

I left engineering alone for many years.

I went to college and earned degrees in political science and criminal justice, but that still did not satisfy my love for science and engineering. I graduated from Chicago State University and finally stopped running away from science and engineering. I enrolled in grad school at Northern Illinois University for a Masters in Engineering Technology and Industrial Management Degree.

I have had lots of time to organize my thoughts and plans for the future. Upon my release I will be enrolling in a PhD program at Harvard, University of Chicago or MIT. I will not dwell on my being rejected by Tesla and Google; I plan to continue to build my own company, Uganda Robotics.

I want to help the poor and under-served with my research and development of advanced robotic exoskeleton systems to allow paraplegic/quadruplegic individuals to walk/run, robotic prosthetic limbs for amputees, and nano-robotic systems that will one day eradicate all viruses and cure cancer/all ailments. I still get those doubtful looks from my white counterparts in the tech world, but I have noticed that the demographics have changed over the years and there are more opportunities now for black and brown engineers. The struggles I have endured have given me an edge, and I know that I will do great things in the near future.

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# BLACK AND PROUD

D'MARLO REED  
KEWANEE CC

I am an African-American man with reasons to be proud.

I struggled constantly in the black community where I grew up. I was born into a world where I would not be treated equally because of the color of my skin.

My skin taught me how bad systemic racism has divided our country. I understand I was born to lose, but I built myself to win.

Despite all the adversity I've faced as a black man, I don't feel I'm winning, I know I'm winning.

I'm conquering the roadblocks set in place for me as a black man.

I've made some bad decisions and am where I am today, but I'm still standing. I'm able to tell the story of my history, a history that signifies why I'm proud to be who I am.

I'm not just proud to be Black in February, I'm proud to be Black every month.



# BLACK

SELENA STEAD

DECATUR CC

They say Black Lives Matter  
You're my sister; you're my brother  
But what's really sad -  
We're super quick to kill each other

Tear down all the statues  
Say a million names  
If this world stays divided  
It will always remain the same

How do we solve this problem?  
It's a mystery to me  
After February 28th  
My Black is history

So after all the riots and marching  
And all the damage is done  
There's one thing we need to remember  
"Black" ...  
...is all the colors in  
one!

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# BIRTH

MAURICE MONTGOMERY  
KEWANEE LSRC

A flash of light,  
then a beating sound echoes in my head.  
My heart beats!  
Next, a burning sensation through my lungs,  
I breathe air. I cry.  
I'm cold and wet, then warmly covered.  
All I can see are dark shapes and sounds I don't understand.  
A dark shape holds me close. Is this the birth of me?  
What are these shapes?  
They seem to love me, what will they call me?  
How do I see them and what are their colors?  
What is my color?  
I must be important because there are a lot of shapes around and lights.  
Did these shape chose me or did I chose these shapes?  
I don't know what to do. How many chances do I have at this life thing?  
Is this the life I will live forever?  
Now I am much older  
and the experience I've shared  
is possibly the greatest experience  
anyone's experienced.  
We are gifted with African-American lives.  
There have been many odds against us.  
We are special, though.  
We are chosen to carry our line  
and keep our heritage alive.  
We are chosen to overcome the odds against us,  
No matter what you're going through in life,  
always remember the pain and happiness  
on the day of your birth.  
I am proud to be of African heritage  
and you should be also.  
We survived when others didn't.  
We are special.  
We are royalty.  
We are of a race that is the link to all other races  
and cannot be erased.



# THE N-WORD

MICHAEL HARRELL

My experience with race is complex and multifaceted. I am an African American man from the Westside of Chicago. I am the son of a woman born in Clarksdale, Mississippi during the Jim Crow era.

I was born in the 70s and raised in the 80s. The N-word was a commonly used term in my neighborhood, but never in my home.

As an avid fan of 2Pac, one day I was rapping a popular verse from the song "Violent": Never Ignorant Gettin' Goals Accomplished. This was a seemingly crafty acronym for an altered derivative of the n-word.

This was a slick use because it didn't possess the venomous connotation of the original word that ends with "er".

Instead it ended with an "a".

Upon trying to articulate this sentiment to my mother I received a look a son never wants to see from his mother: consternation and utter disappointment. My mother never used the n-word and cringed when she heard it.

A woman who had heard, felt, and experienced the vileness of this lexical unit would not be persuaded that a pig dressed up and donning lipstick was anything other than a pig.

I researched the n-word and learned that it is arguably the most degenerative, oppressive word uttered by man.

Its' etymology, connotation, and denotation are not universally consistent from one historian to the next. What is consistent is that the original form of this word was never created or used for anything good or

respectful.

As beings that need to name things in order to understand them, it's important to acknowledge the ontological fact that words have power.

It's important to educate ourselves and not accept or do things just because our culture does them.

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“Racism is an insidious and rampant disease that eats on people. It is far worse than COVID-19 in the way it can kill your plans, hopes and dreams. As an older black man, I hope that someday we all respect each other...”

**Preston Gresham**

“Racism isn’t limited to just one race, it occurs daily to all types of people. It’s hate and hate breeds hate. The only solution to hate is love.”

**Bradley “Boomer” Martin  
Danville C.C.**

“News anchors can’t report this / I’m in a jam can't record this/ Phone calls sound distorted/ What is freedom can’t afford it/But what I say you can’t ignore this/2020 Pandemic whole world in a panic/ wish I could take us out this madness / sit us in a Panoramic/so we could have a bird’s eye view/ while they reveal the truth!”

**Reginald Demonte Alexander**

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## My Country

Bullets flyin', Mama's cryin'.

Black seeds disappearin' on an unjustified police diet.

These the divided states, my country tis' of thee,  
sweet land of desperation, prison cells and misery.  
Built on whips, sweat and history.

Now I'm kept on commisary billz, Sally Mae and twitter feeds.  
But we remember,  
every year.  
to say our name.

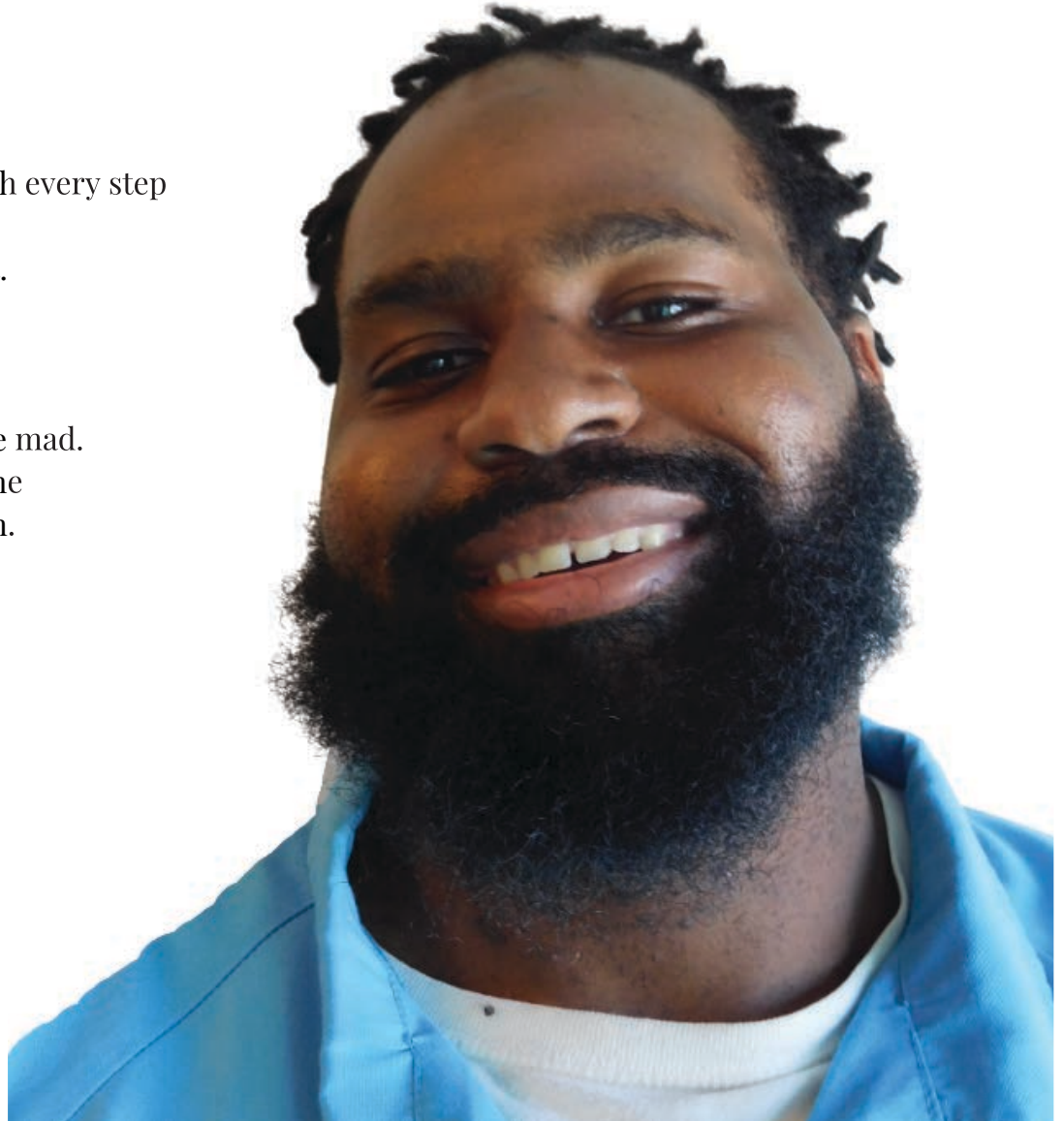
Fight the power.

History is rewritten with every step  
we take,  
and every step we don't.

Black history.

Remember, but don't be mad.  
Look how far we've come  
as we plot our next path.

**Armand Isaac**



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# Two Roads

Kewanee LSRC's Restorative Justice Program

## V9 Black History Month

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