

Event Title: What it Means to be Free

Event Description:

In his 1983 "Letter to Prisoners," James Baldwin writes: "What artists and prisoners have in common is that we both know what it means to be free." For the writer and activist concerned with social justice, the mass incarceration system in the U.S. is the final frontier of arts programming and writing workshops. Writers and educators within the system will discuss trauma-informed pedagogical strategies, censorship, and structures you can implement for correctional engagement in your community.

Event Merit:

This panel will be an academic, artistic, and professional approach not only to facilitating writing workshops in jails and prisons but starting the necessary conversation around engagement with incarcerated writers and their content. The recent response to Poetry Magazine's Feb 2021 issue has shown clearly that the literary community must come together on this so as not to further marginalize the most vulnerable population on the planet. This will be a safe and open space for difficult topics.

Event Category: Program Development

Event/Panel Organizer & Moderator:

Jen Fitzgerald is a poet, essayist, and photographer. She is the founder of Arthur Kill Books. Her first full-length collection, "The Art of Work" was published by Noemi Press in 2016. Her work has appeared in such venues as: PBS Newshour, The Nation, Tin House, Boston Review, and NER. JenFitzgerald.com

Panelists:

Gigi Blanchard is a writer and founder of The Kite, which facilitates storytelling workshops in detention centers for youth in adults across NYC. Her work draws on her own experience of coming of age in youth prisons and she is currently seeking representation for her forthcoming memoir: gigiblanchard.com.

Rosalyn Spencer, educator and advocate holds a B.A. in English, MLS in Public Library and MEd in Educational Leadership. She directs youth art programs and

teaches ELA in Greater New Orleans. She is a grant writer, advocate and supporter of the arts in education, equitable curriculum.

Dr. Ravi Shankar, Pushcart-prize winning author of "Correctional" & professor at Tufts University, has written 15 books. Chairman of APWT & founder of Drunken Boat, he has won fellowships from Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony & PEN, appeared on the BBC, PBS & NPR & in The NY Times, Paris Review & more.

Jessica Hall, LMSW, is the founder and Executive Director of Prison Writes. Jessica has over two decades experience working with marginalized and vulnerable populations and graduated with honors from the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College with a focus on Community Organizing.

Opening Remarks:

Jen Fitzgerald will discuss the importance of creating new structures and employment opportunities at the intersection of writing and social activism. She will introduce the literary community to Arthur Kill Press, a new, Staten Island based press that focuses on Incarcerated, Institutionalized, and Marginalized Voices as well as an academic approach to the philosophy and practical applications of the carceral.

Gigi Blanchard talk about how we recreate spaces on the inside to make them conducive for sharing personal stories, and how we are also working to recreate the word Opps to mean Opportunities (because words have power and we can change them!). As we tell our students, "Use that same energy you use to take down Opps and take down opportunities instead." Through the use of storytelling, we encourage our students to examine their own lives and assist them to imagine future narratives free of police contact. We recently published a Kite Guide to Opps, which is an educational resource for students serving time. We used personal stories, including of my own time in youth prison, to impart the information.

Rosalyn Spencer will be discussing the school to prison pipeline system that is prevalent especially in Louisiana. Creating opportunities for not only creative writing opportunities, literacy, but workforce education, scholarships and programs that are beneficial to youth, especially those who have become part of a system at an early age. Also using those writing skills to create grants and other programs when needed.

Dr. Ravi Shankar will discuss his experience as an academic and educator working at York Correctional Institute, a women's prison in Niantic, Connecticut, prior to my own incarceration for 90 days at Hartford Correctional Center, and how that experience changed my pedagogical approach and made me more keenly aware of the needs of the incarcerated population and the impact of bibliotherapy in helping heal trauma. I would like to juxtapose that experience at York with work I have done since with Harvest Kitchen, a culinary job training program for youth ages 16–19 involved with the RI Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) and as a member of the theatrical group And Still We Rise, comprised by those affected by the criminal justice system. I will plan to contextualize this discussion with a small reading from "Correctional" that speaks to carceral conditions.

Founding Director, Jessica Hall will be discussing Prison Writes' approach uses an innovative social work model providing significant protective measures for vulnerable participants.

"I'll tell you what **Freedom** is to me. No **fear**." — **Nina Simone**. She will talk about how the social work model contributes towards creating enough of a sense of safety in impossibly unsafe spaces, for participants to take the risks necessary for learning and self-expression.

"Education means emancipation." Frederick Douglas. Jessica will explain how Prison Writes engages with participants to infuse them with the sense of promise literacy can bring. Literacy development and education are *the* pathways to freedom and the connecting fiber of every other thing a person may want to pursue.

Jen will end the panel with some thoughts on how to responsibly handle the content produced in these settings, objectivity, self-care, and stringent boundaries. She will also discuss the February 2021 literary community response to Poetry Magazine's issue featuring incarcerated voices.

We will then open to Q&A for the remainder of the panel. And intend for a lively and respectful conversation around these difficult topics.