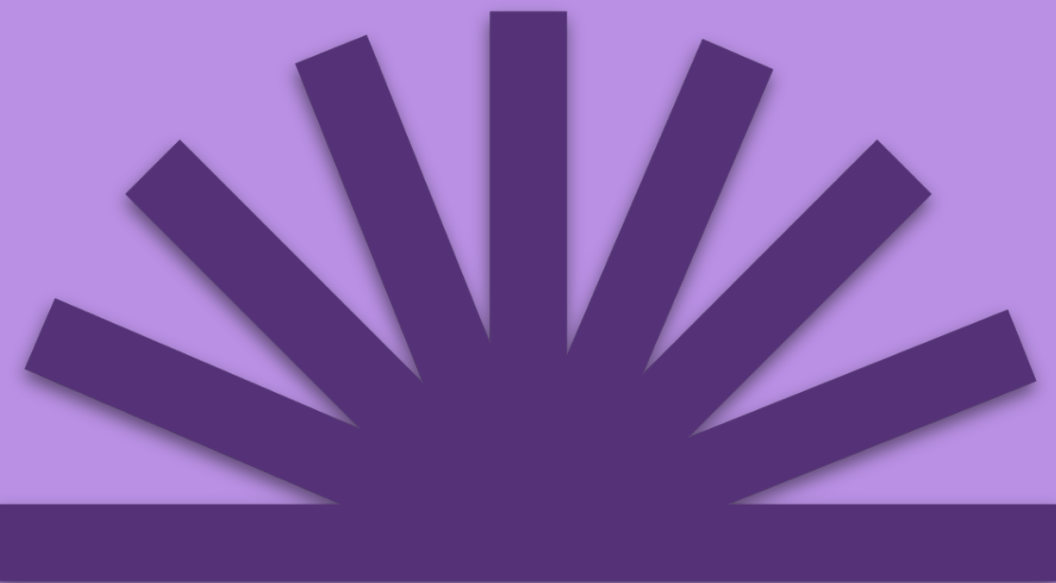
THE BRONX WRITES BACK

THE CRADLE TO PRISON PIPELINE



This book is dedicated to all the young people in the Bronx whose lives have been deterred or destroyed by the cradle to prison pipeline.

Foreword

By Makeda Byfield

Youth Facilitator,

Bronx Leadership & Organizing Center Community Action Council

During my sophomore year of high school, the family policing system (known as the Administration for Children's Services in New York City) opened the second of four child maltreatment investigations against my family. That particular case ended with the agency requiring us to do family therapy — an intervention that failed to live up to its promise of actually helping us. The first question the therapist asked us was, "Why are we here?" He seemed unamused when my siblings and I laughed at what seemed like a silly question. His exact next words slip my memory, but his assumptions stick with me: something was wrong if the family policing system required us to be in therapy, and their scrutiny of our family would not end until we could hold ourselves accountable and be honest about our dysfunction

Fifteen-year-old me took the therapist's stern approach as an indication that parts of (or perhaps even the entire) family had in fact done something wrong to necessitate the agency's continued presence in our lives. Years later, the experience stuck with me, impacting how I process things like my mother seeking help as a survivor of domestic violence, going through the family shelter system, and eventually seeking mental health care for myself. We hoped to get assistance and instead felt ridiculed and surveilled. We were not failed by systems that were supposed to support us; instead, those systems were working as designed to regulate and punish specific communities for struggling.

For some miraculous reason, this trauma never led to me being arrested, an outcome that many people deemed "at-risk" experience. Still, my childhood is a snapshot of the cradle to prison pipeline— an issue that the Bronx Leadership and Organizing Center (BLOC) has prioritized.

Co-created by The Bronx Defenders, East Side House Settlement, and New Settlement, BLOC serves as a network of over forty-five Bronx-based organizations dedicated to centering and supporting the community's vision of a better Bronx. The opportunities to learn organizing skills allow Bronx residents to feel more confident in collectively targeting the issues we want to change in our own neighborhoods — like those around economic mobility, youth leadership, housing/homelessness, and more. And after listening to youth members of the BLOC, we are now increasingly focusing on the cradle to prison pipeline.

The stories in this book illuminate the various ways this pipeline plagues the Bronx. Each author has experienced it differently: some have been through the criminal legal system, while others grew up in foster care, witnessed familial violence, or felt unsupported at school. The common thread is that each of these amazing authors is a survivor of cycles they should never have been through in the first place. It is an honor to bear witness as they reclaim their narratives and tell them in their own words.

As I continue in the early stages of an organizing and social work career, I have heard the problematic phrase "giving a voice to the voiceless" several times. I cannot stress enough that nobody is voiceless— they just need to be heard.

So, as you read this book, I ask that you truly listen to each author as they courageously share how the cradle to prison pipeline has impacted them. These stories are not instructions for how to survive oppressive systems. They are not simply meant for reflection. My former professor in my *Ending Mass Incarceration* course often ended their lectures by asking the class "So what? And now what?" to encourage us to take action after learning about systemic injustices. These questions could not be more relevant now. The authors featured in this book are not just urging us to feel something, but to *do* something about the oppression our community faces.

"The Bronx Writes Back: The Cradle to Prison Pipeline" lets BLOC amplify the voices of six incredible storytellers and nine artists

who fought against the pipeline at every turn. Let each frustrating and uncomfortable part of their stories move you to also disrupt how the carceral system is embedded in your everyday life. This book is just one step toward fostering a Bronx where everyone can thrive. We hope that sharing these experiences makes you feel seen and inspired to join our neighbors in the fight to dismantle the pipeline.

Ahimar Pineda- Soto

Overstimulated

By S.J.J.

The lights are too bright.
Fluorescents always drove me crazy;
The sound of shoes squeaking, stomping, pacing.
The smell of cafeteria food mixed with cheap perfume and sweat.
I know I should be focused.
But the student behind me keeps talking –
I want to scream,
"Please, just be quiet."
But I don't.
I stay silent.
Worries from home creep in like shadows.
What fight is happening today?
Who's yelling?
Will someone get hurt?
Insecurity wraps around me like a hoodie I can't take off.
I keep my head down.
Failure whispers that I'm not smart enough,
Not strong enough.
Anxiety moves through my body like it owns me.
I try to breathe,
But even my breath feels too loud.

I am always
100% overstimulated.
Not just by sound, or light, or smell—
But by life.

And life at home?
Was never calm.

I witnessed domestic violence regularly.
The kind that makes you flinch even at kindness.
I was molested in the same space where I was supposed to feel safe.
By that time, I was diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety, derealization, dissociation.
At school, I was quiet.
Not because I didn't have thoughts,
But because I was too busy surviving.

In 8th grade, I was a victim of sexual assault outside of my home.
The Special Victims Unit handled my case with very little care.
We didn't move forward with a trial.
And with all the doctor's appointments
I missed a lot of school.

When I tried to return to school, my mom met with the principal and my guidance counselor.
That counselor told a teacher my situation — in front of students.
By the time I returned,
Everybody knew.
Whispers followed me down the hallway.
Laughter cut like blades.
I was bullied relentlessly.

Eventually, I refused to go back.
That led to an ACS case.
Another system, more appointments,
More stress at home.

My teachers failed me in more ways than one.

My mother decided she couldn't handle the stress & we left,
First to Belize.

But Belize wasn't a sanctuary – it became another battleground.
We were beaten there – me and my mom.
Abuse doesn't stop just because the scenery changes.
We were just trying to survive.

We sold what little we had – my violin & my mother's engagement ring –
And ran.
That's how we ended up in Jamaica.
Hoping for peace, or maybe just a break from the pain.

But peace didn't come.

In Jamaica, the trauma followed.
I was sexually assaulted again
by family,
and a math teacher.
I was only 14.

I felt humiliated.
Dirty.
Like an outcast.
Like my pain had nowhere safe to land.

I came back to New York in 2017.
Fifteen years old,
a British Caribbean girl born & raised in Brooklyn,
I didn't know where I fit in,
only that I had to keep moving.
I didn't recognize the girl in the mirror anymore.
I had seen too much,
felt too much.
The world around me felt too loud,

and inside, I felt silent.

By 17, I was pregnant.
And that changed everything.
I was terrified.
Ashamed.
Still trying to process my past,
and now responsible for a future.

Two weeks after my 18th birthday, I became a mother.
And in that moment, something awakened in me.
It wasn't just about keeping a child alive —
It was about choosing to *live* myself.

Learning to mother my child—
while also re-mothering my own inner child.

It meant unpacking my trauma.

At 22, I went to the shelter with my baby in search of stability.

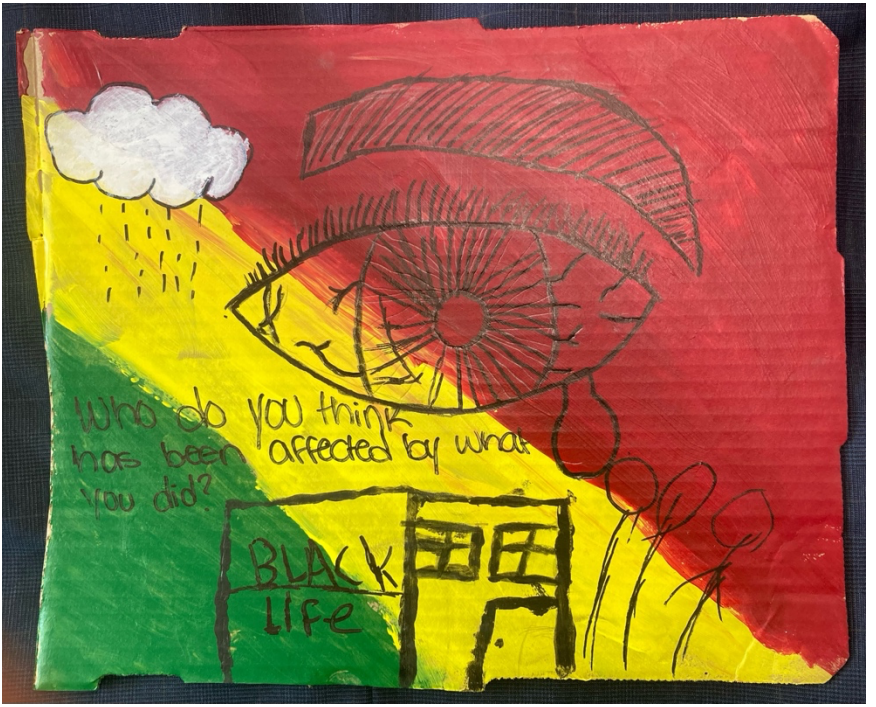
Staying in my childhood one bedroom apartment wasn't working anymore and it hadn't been working for a while.
So I took a leap.
8 months & a lot of emotional turmoil later,

At 23 I finally feel safe.
I'm still learning & the insecurities still creep in.
I've lost a lot of memories,
but through therapy & prayer I've slowly been regaining memories.

I can focus,

Find clarity and show my beautiful 5-year-old daughter how to thrive, not just Survive.

After being broken down to an unrecognizable version of myself,
I've found my Strength.



Flako2X

What the Cradle to Prison Pipeline Means to Me

By Bronx Youth[1]

A cause and effect.
A system that directs certain groups of people into prison.
Cultural differences should not divide us.
We can overcome the obstacles that we were given unwillingly.
Influence of environment.
System failures lead to traumatized population.
Systems put in place to keep us from succeeding.
We all suffer and are punished from mistakes.
Families losing themselves.
You're gonna get out that mindset.
Youth need more safe spaces.
Everyone is fighting a battle, unity is important and necessary.
Being raised by the prison system.
Becoming a man through the system.
One moment you're innocent, the next is 10 years in prison.
The cradle to prison pipeline remind me of people's resilience.
The factors that contribute to ending up in prison since your birth.
The cradle to prison pipeline reminds me of the importance of support.
It reminds me that people can inspire others.
A cradle is supposed to be calm, the cradle to prison pipeline ls definitely not calm.

[1] These poems were co-created by Bronx youth who attended the Bronx Writes Back: Mass Story Lab on April 29, 2025, hosted by the BLOC, The Bronx Defenders, and Create Forward. After listening to the individual storytellers in this book share their stories, attendees were asked to share one sentence about what the cradle to prison pipeline reminds them of. Over thirty people who attended contributed to this poem, ultimately reflecting one single thread of solidarity.

Kareem Adames Gibson

Set Up for Failure, Proved the System Wrong

By Florentino "Born" Laureano

Not all experience a lifestyle such as mine, with traps and gaps. Some grow up with gold spoons while others only have plastic ones.

I can still envision that gallon of milk being a gallon of water. Eating a bowl of corn flakes with only water. In my household, rice went with everything: rice and ketchup, rice soup with milk and sugar, rice and beans, rice and eggs, rice and butter, and on very few days we would eat rice with chicken or meat.

You see, many would say that was crazy, especially when peanut butter sandwiches would carry us throughout the night. But for me, I thought it was a normal thing until I realized my mother had nothing else to cook.

My father was a drug user. All our money went to his usage which then drove my mother to depend on alcohol. My school days were not normal for a 12 or 13-year-old child. My house was full of empty alcohol bottles, and a missing father didn't help. My focus was not school but selling weed sticks. I didn't need math class to count my money. I even tried packing bags at the supermarket. Cleaning car windows and car washing. With the change I made from packing bags, I would have enough to buy a bag of rice, a can of beans, then I would tuck a tray of chicken so that we could eat meat that night. I couldn't make too much with car washing because there were too many problems between drivers refusing or just not enough time between light changes. I still laugh at how we used to throw full buckets of soapy water at cars for not letting us clean. Enjoying the drivers chasing us and laughing it off as if we had just lived another dramatic moment.

These times brought me so much pain, a pain so deep I felt it running through my veins and turning me into a real mean kid. All I started thinking was how to make fast money with no patience or

positive direction. I felt the streets trying to turn me into a young thug, a bully, a drug dealer, maybe even a killer.

Spofford Detention Center at 12-years-old and learning to adapt in a harsh environment was not easy. In 1982 while in A2 dorm, I saw a kid die in the bathroom. We used to tighten our chests and take turns punching each other in the chest. This was a way of proving we were tough. There was one kid who had a heart murmur and when he was punched, he dropped holding his chest. We later found out he passed away. That was the end of more than one kid allowed in the bathroom at a time. The bathroom was where we spent time without adult supervision. We were able to fight without the staff knowing. Some would even get jumped in the bathroom. It was our so-called "freedom zone." No one, including staff, facility social workers, family, or so-called friends were there to show me the other side of life. I still don't understand why no one took the time to counsel me but rather predicted that I would be a career criminal and instead gave up on me at a time when we were just trying to survive.

Before my arrest experiences, I thought I was living a basic childhood. I was trying to focus on going to school because that made my mom happy. I remember witnessing my dad sitting in the bathtub with a needle in his arm. Now I know he was shooting dope, but at 10-years-old, I didn't have a clue what it was. After several attempts to get clean, my dad would depend on methadone. I would accompany him to pick up his orange "biscuit" which he didn't take. We would walk blocks, and blocks, and blocks until he would sell it for $25. That would give us enough to buy food for about a week.

Between the age of 13 and 14 was when I was forced to grow up. It was around 1978 when my mother received a letter from her mother, who at the time was living in Miami, Florida. She shared that she was on her deathbed. It had been over 20 years since they had seen each other. My mother was so tired of the ups and downs with my father and his continuous relapse, she took our important papers and got on the Amtrak with her three boys and left everything

behind. That was her way out. That trip was when I discovered that Amtrak had rooms with double bunk beds. They even had a bar, which they kept chasing me out of. Due to witnessing what my parents went through, I never took a liking to liquor and have never tried taking drugs. I never wanted to be a part of their lifestyle. My mother tried to give us a better life. Now I see the struggles that parents go through. I am a proud father of a 21-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter.

I don't remember why my mother argued with her mother, but I know that around two weeks after we arrived in Florida, my father then showed up to my grandmother's house. I just think that he found us right on time because after that argument she stormed out and told her mother that she would never see her again. With nowhere to go, my dad broke into a house that was under construction. It didn't have water or electricity. We would all lay our heads against each other and use candles for light. Little did we know that those candles would alert the police and cause my siblings and I to be taken from our parents for a whole year. You see, at 10-years-old I was already seeing the inside of family court, precincts, and group homes. At the group home where we were placed was a residential facility for both the elderly and youth. Only divided by two double swinging doors. The facility was surrounded by a waist high fence. It was easy for me to hop and run away for two to three days at a time. My meals were often 7-Eleven coke slushies and chips which I would grab and run with. Sometimes I also had apples and oranges from back yards, until I was picked up by Miami PD and taken back to the group home. My brothers and I would repeat the process, seeing a judge every three months. During these appearances, we were able to spend about 10 minutes with our parents. The pain and hurt of having to see my mother and dad and hear that due to them not having a stable residence, employment, or income we were denied unification. The tears we shed when we had to return to our group home was unbearable. My little brothers

would hug my mother and refuse to let go until they were broken apart by the counselors. I continued running away every chance I had with the hopes of finding them. I can't explain the joy I felt learning that the final court date was going to be my last time in the group home. Which meant no more running away, no more little chocolate milk containers with graham crackers before bedtime, no more hearing that the lights would go off in 10 minutes. Yes, I was going to be free. Or so I thought.

In 1980, my mother fled Miami due to fearing for the family's safety after hearing that a police officer killed a black man driving a scooter with a flashlight. Miami suffered many riots. We returned to the Bronx which was nothing more than a bunch of burnt down buildings. I played hooky through so many empty buildings. We would run an electrical extension cord to the light pole and have lights. It was easy deceiving my mother. While thinking I was in school all the time I was running the streets.

My dad registered me to a school that was rough. It was known for having strict rules. Diana Sands 147, located by Webster Projects. After two weeks of cutting class, the principal Mr. Hart instructed me to place my hands on his desk while striking me with his big wooden paddle. He was only able to hit me once before I ran out of his office. All night I kept looking in the mirror, seeing all those little red dots left by that paddle. I kept loading and unloading a 25-caliber gun. I knew Mr. Hart was wrong for hitting so many other children. Something deep inside kept telling me I had to be the one to stop him. I ran inside that morning and by the grace of God Mr. Hart was not in his office. He was running late. I was arrested and given a sentence of 6 to 9 months at the Division for Youth (DFY).

Too many youths feel that same pain because of what they see throughout their streets and communities. It gives a sense of having no other choices. All we have is sex, money, and murder. Rap music constantly portrays a rich lifestyle. Our streets show expensive

cars driven by drug dealers. Gangs overpower our positive role models.

I remember doing my 9 months and returning home to my mother. Her tears of joy while my so-called homies glorified me for what I had done in school. Not too many will give you respect for graduating from school but will definitely give you respect for coming out of prison.

Thriving on that attention is why I spent my entire youth behind prison walls until the age of 30. Too many years I was set up for failure. Too many more years our future generations will see and feel the same way I have.

My freedom was not a physical one. Starting with my memories, as far back as I can remember, all I saw was physical handcuffs with daisy chains. There is nothing like feeling those cold cuffs cutting into your wrist. It didn't matter how the officers tried to adjust the tightness, that metal would catch you every time, the connecting chains keeping everyone in a single line would place more pressure on your wrist. The shackles would peel the skin of your ankles. The physical body is tortured. There is no escaping that pain.

The pain of having to experience youth counselors or correction officers strip you down naked and humiliate you in front of other prisoners. Being sprayed with watered down roach spray. Everyone is getting searched together in a single room. Ordered to open your mouth, showing that you had no drugs or weapons. Ordered to turn around and spread them, to show that you didn't have contraband. Getting jumped by correction officers to prove a point of control for others to see. It didn't matter if you tried to stay out of trouble, behind those walls, there's no escaping it. There is always one that will not like you or fear how you look. In some places whether you belong to a borough, race, or religion, you will have to fight as one. At times by not telling, "snitching," you will wind up in PC-protective custody or special housing unit, also known as the box.

Prison scars mean nothing because they are part of life for those who are in there. You will learn how to survive or simply die.

Everyone currently incarcerated is forced to face two things: stay focused and come home or lose yourself and die inside. I know some who were facing 18 months and turned out going up with 7 to life. The more crimes committed behind the prison wall will only get you rearrested, and more years added to your initial case. No matter how big the struggle or situation, one must remain surrounded by family and believe in a higher power. While you are there, only the ones that truly matter and care will be there for you. I just felt my wars were not with others but spiritual. It took me some years to visualize what really mattered. I had to make a conscious decision, whether to choose life over death.

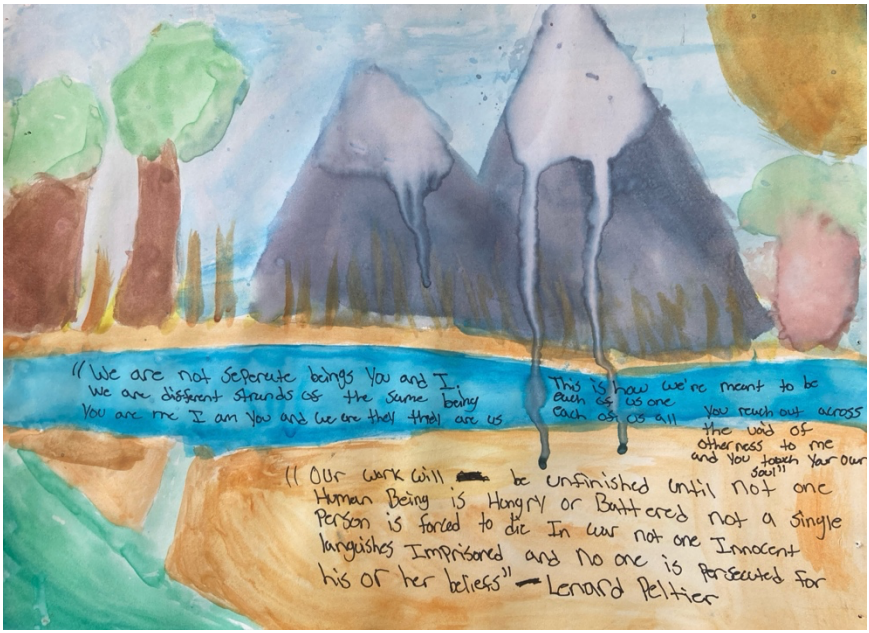
Every day, I fight against memories that want me to give into a life of fast money. So many temptations out here. I deeply appreciate my family for allowing me the time to spend with them. I know my past experiences have torn me apart. I will never be able to see or gain control of my youth years. Knowing that part of my history consists of losing a brother to gun violence at 18. Steven - R.I.P! Another brother after coming home from 22 years of incarceration dying by drug overdose. Eddie - R.I.P! My youngest brother completed his 9-year sentence and the death of our mother at 4 o'clock in the morning the day after Thanksgiving in 2004. Elsie – R.I.P! My pain is forever etched in stone. But I also know I'm not the only one or will be the last one.

I will, every day, fight for my family's survival and continue breaking those chains. Yes, now I know there is a system in place to prevent us from reaching high mountains. There are groups of people that do not want Black and brown communities to succeed. Yes, a system set up for failure. But yes! I will continue to prove that system wrong. We are all born into this world with free will. It is through the ignorance of our families that our youth often becomes corrupted. I believe that through the persistence and consistent

sharing of my story others can gain a degree of knowledge to prevent future corruption. I pray so many can begin taking charge of their free will again. We must be willing to return home and leave the streets. I challenge anyone who feels the streets bring out the best in them. I have been there and can show them how to get out.

My wife and I work hard for our children to know success because society tries to work harder for them to fail. My story is heartbreaking but hopeful. I have shown my children that in life they will be set up for failure, but they must always choose to be set up for success. They have to choose to push forward for change.

Broken systems can crush people — but my choice to fight for my family and faith has completely changed what could have been my ending.



Alvin Lorenzo

People Who Are Hurt

By Steffanie E. Laureano[2]

Sometimes, when people find out my dad used to be in prison, they only see the label "ex-felon." They don't see who he is now. But I do. I see a man who turned his life around, who works hard, and who loves his family. I see someone who deserves a second chance.

My dad is not perfect, but no one is. He is kind, smart, and always there for me and our family. He teaches about doing the right thing and reminds others to stay strong, even when things are tough. To me, he is a teacher, a protector, and someone who shows love every day. The words "criminal" or "felon" don't belong to him in my heart. Instead, I call him Dad—and that means everything.

It's heartbreaking to hear his story. When he was younger, he made some bad choices. He often shares how those choices led him to be locked up for many years. He missed so much—holidays, birthdays, and time with loved ones. I can tell it still hurts him deeply when he talks about those times. Even though he made mistakes, he paid the price, and he came out a better person.

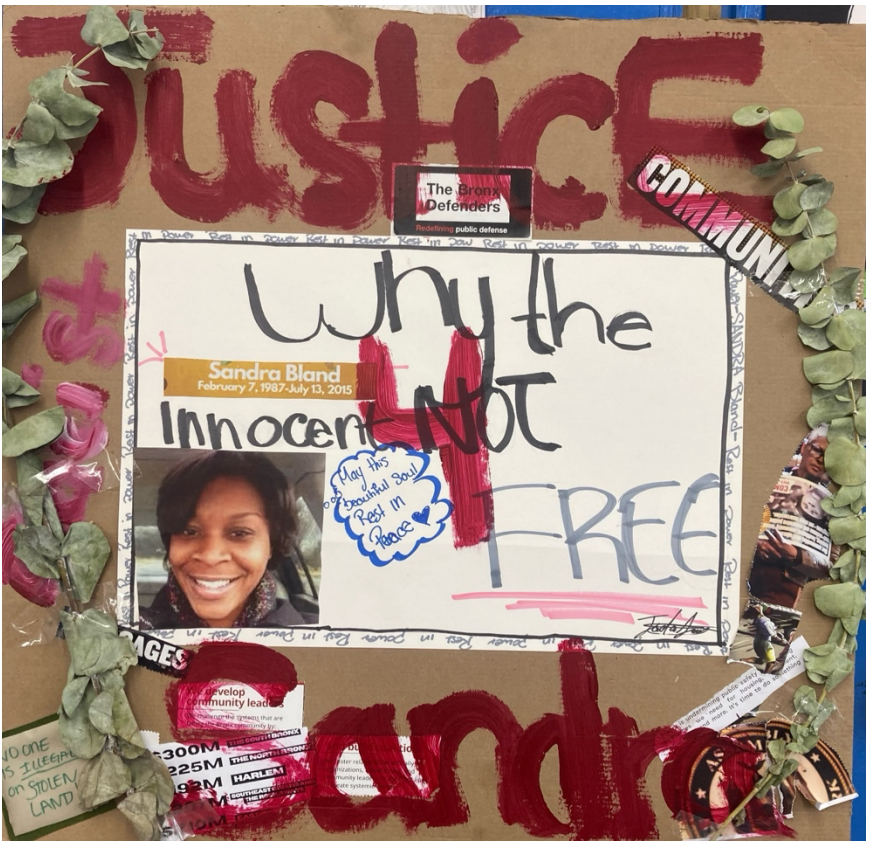
There are so many men and women who have been through the same things. Many of them are good people who were just stuck in bad situations or who were never given help when they needed it. But the system doesn't look at their hearts. It only looks at what they did wrong.

My dad is proof that people can change. He got out, stayed out, and now tries to help others not make the same mistakes.

I'm proud of my dad. He's made it through something really hard and didn't give up. He shows me that second chances matter and that everyone deserves to be seen for who they are now, not who they used to be. I hope that one day, the world will stop seeing

[2] Steffanie is Florentino Laureano's daughter.

people only for their past and start seeing their future—just like I see my dad.



Jada Lea Perez

Into the Gates

By Gyselle Valentin

People don't warn you before crossing the gates of hell, and entering the world of foster care. Well, thank God I was made to spill the deepest and darkest secrets of New York City's broken foster care system.

Let me take you back to the very beginning: little Gyselle, just 8-years-old and filled with so much joy, but also so much hate. She didn't know her life was about to change for the worse.

Bounced around from foster home to foster home because the foster parents did not know, or have the tools, to deal with her anger problems. And even though her life seemed bad at the time, there was worse coming her way. Yes, she would lash out and throw tantrums when she didn't get her way, but how could you blame her after being separated from her siblings and finally realizing her mother was unfit to raise her?

Everybody thought she was out of her mind because she didn't know the right way to react to certain things and the foster parents never hesitated to bring her to the hospital, where the doctors would ask her the dumbest questions like "do you want to harm yourself?" and all she could think of was "hell yeah I do, because why would I want to be in the shitty situation I'm in now?"

Doctors could not figure out what's wrong with her, so they turned to medication. For anyone who thinks medications solve all problems, news flash: they DO NOT. The drugs had her feeling like a walking zombie that couldn't feel anything.

And don't get me started on her first group home. Boy that was the worst of the worst – some things you can forget, but this was unforgettable. The experience haunts her in her sleep. You might as well call it jail, because when she pulled up to the guard booth all she saw was a scene from a scary movie, with the heart pounding music

playing in her head. The place was surrounded by nothing but woods. This was not a place she wanted to be.

Inside, everything was weird: the doors were locked, and the dorm was like a maze. In each corner was a thin, blue, plastic mattress and a locker and a community bathroom.

After a few months settling down, she had to grow to be a woman at just 13-years-old. She couldn't sleep and had to keep one eye open, in case somebody tried to steal her stuff or maybe even attack her. She had to learn to fight, not because of her anger problems, but simply to survive.

The staff was only there to get paid – she even saw youth buy weed from some of them. She was raped and reported it to staff, but no action was taken.

This was when she started being in her rebellious stage – running away anywhere else was better than there.

As much as she wanted to just end it all, she knew she had a calling and was here for a reason. She ran away and went ghost for a while until they discharged her from that placement.

Fast forward a couple months later. She got the news another placement accepted her packet but that could only mean one thing, and it wasn't good. She did not want to go but she didn't have a choice. A little bit of anger released when she saw the placement was a regular-looking house and not a whole campus of crazy kids.

She ran away not even 10 minutes after being dropped off, all because they asked for her phone for a probation period. And guess what? She got dropped off again, so back to the nightmare she went.

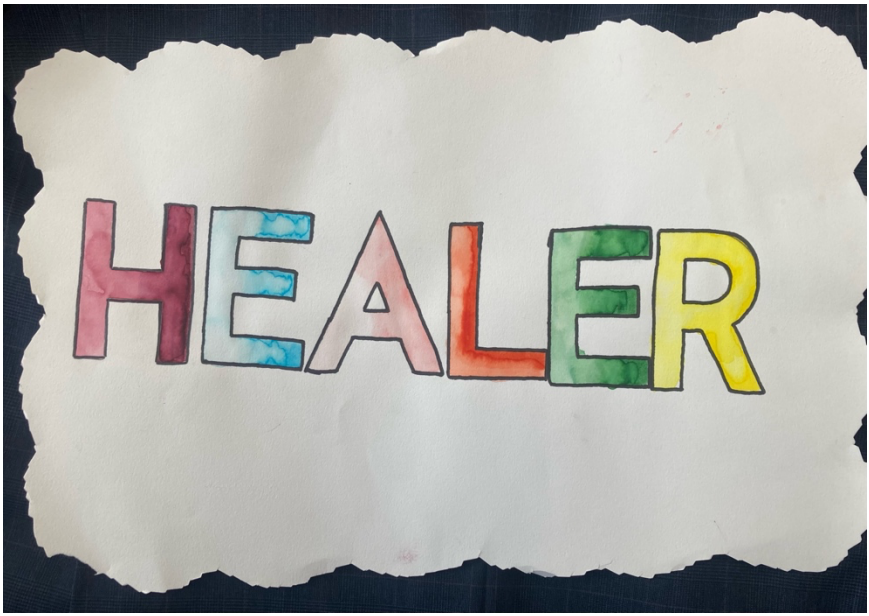
It wasn't all that bad – the staff was nice, she just hated all the therapy groups. Her focus was planning her adulthood. She knew she was getting older, which not only made her happy, but drove her crazy with all the planning.

Times were finally in her favor. She slept comfortably, the staff didn't judge her, they tried to understand the situation at hand, they even enforced reasonable rules to follow. She had some of the

best moments there with the love the staff gave her, to the stern talks about her behavior.

Years down the line she got her own apartment and is now going to school to get her social work degree. Things from the past still pop up in her head from time to time, but as she grew, she realized she went through all those bad times to be able to help another person who went through the same situation. She has an incredible soul, she is a survivor, she is a warrior.

SHE IS ME.



Helen Frias

Defiance

By K.O.E.

Elementary school was different for me. I got in trouble almost every day and got suspended a few times. Both the teachers and students knew once I came into the class that they were going to laugh and see me do something out of the ordinary. I always did things I shouldn't have, and when I look back now, I'm not completely sure why, especially since I actually liked school.

The majority of the time I was causing a ruckus or disturbing the class. Over time, these little disruptions became a habit and eventually became more serious. It didn't even matter that they called my mom almost every day and even asked her to sit in the classroom with me. This one time I even threw a pack of crayons at the teacher. I know right? Throwing crayons at the teacher now seems unbelievable. But she had got me mad telling me what to do, and I didn't like it. That day sticks out, but it wouldn't be the last time I would be involved in some incident. Very soon after, I got into a scuffle with the teacher over an umbrella she tried to take away from me. While we were pulling the umbrella back and forth, she got scratched in the process and told the principal she was afraid for her life. They suspended me, and my mom had to fight to get the amount of time of the suspension reduced.

I remember that scuffle because I did not want the teacher to take the umbrella away. My mom had told me that morning, if I didn't come home with her umbrella I would be in trouble because I was always losing things like hats, scarves, and gloves. Trust me, I was not coming home without that umbrella. But afraid for her life? Over a scratch? Really?

My early memories of being suspended still linger with me to this day over twelve years later. When I look back now, I really wish I had the words back then to say how I was feeling and what was going on. But instead, I was just angry. Even though I was a special

education student, the counseling sessions didn't help, and I was labeled with an oppositional defiant disorder. Even today, I'm like what's that? What does it really mean? Aren't most kids defiant? But I guess not because they medicated me and sent me to additional therapy. But during that time, I was still getting in trouble.

I couldn't stay still, I always felt like I had to be doing something. I tried to leave out of the building during school hours because I wanted to go home and security stopped me and held me. They called my mom and threatened to take me to the police station. To this day, I'm still not sure what my mom said or did, but I didn't go to the police station. Not long after, I got into a big fight with another kid and pushed him in the closet because he made a joke about me. The kid in me said, "he started it" – but I still ended up getting suspended.

But those suspensions were not the turning point in my life. The turning point would come later as a result of state testing. During the state test, I colored in the answers by making a zig zag line. I felt the test was a stupid way of determining whether or not we go to the next grade. Needless to say, I failed. The school said I would have to repeat the third grade. I ended up in summer school and had to retake the test. On the day of the second test, I felt sick to my stomach – I failed again. The thought of being left behind made me so emotional, I cried that whole day. But once again, my mom sprang into action and transferred me to another school. We had actually moved to another part of the Bronx, so I would be going to a school I could walk to instead of taking the school bus back and forth.

The new school in the new neighborhood was different. There were lots of activities and the teachers were nice to me. I made friends in the neighborhood, and I was able to go the park and everything. I don't remember getting in trouble. It took me years to realize that the difference was that the school support team in the new school was a real support team, and that the staff really worked

together to create a plan for me. When my mom met with the team after I had been in school for a few months, the staff pulled out my record and couldn't believe I was the same student. They hadn't had any issues with me. I was immediately taken off medication and started what I thought would become an easy transition with no problems.

But there was one last thing that would shape my educational and personal life, and that was the arrest of my older brother. After I got separated from my brother at the age of 10, I got in trouble at school. The school would not let me return until my mom took me to the hospital to meet with a psychiatrist. I returned to school a few days later, and everyone treated me with care and concern. This time, I was able to say that I missed my brother. Once everyone knew, the school worked with my mom to arrange leaving school early on visitation days so I could see my brother. I can't even tell you what made it ok to finally admit why I was angry, but it made all the difference in the world. I went on to successfully graduate from that elementary school, became an honor roll student in middle school, and recently graduated college.

Everything I went through in elementary school helped to shape who I am today. I learned that sometimes in life we have to do things whether we want to or not, especially as a little kid. And sometimes when we get mad, we can't always feed into other people's energy. Not everyone's energy is the same and we have to know when to let things go. People are always going to talk, and have something to say but we don't have to react. Learning that lesson helped me a lot. Now I think back on it and wonder: what if I hadn't moved to a different school? What if those teachers at the new school had not entered my life? What if my mom wasn't fighting for me every step of the way? My life could have been very different.

Reynaldo Torres De Luna

Our Futures

By Bronx Youth[3]

Minorities are seen as a statistic
And this intersects with systematic racism.
This reminds me of asking Black people unfairly for money.
A system made to aid us has failed us
We need to use our stories to become better
All the stories sound real because they are real
It ain't fair because we all the same color but we're not the same people
Just because the world sees you as a criminal doesn't mean you are one
Because society is trying to set you up for failure
They don't care about helping as they just want the money
Don't let your trauma lead you to bad decisions
Because institutions are reflections of modern day slavery
Equal ignorance from people who are trying to help us
Because you can show me better than you can tell me
Actions speak louder than words
Our oppressors will argue things that don't matter to incarcerate us
Don't let society drag you down
Keep pushing and striving
Because we are a family that stands together
Because our futures matter more than their prisons

[3] These poems were co-created by Bronx youth who attended the Bronx Writes Back: Mass Story Lab on April 29, 2025, hosted by the BLOC, The Bronx Defenders, and Create Forward. After listening to the individual storytellers in this book share their stories, attendees were asked to share one sentence about what the cradle to prison pipeline reminds them of. Over thirty people who attended contributed to this poem, ultimately reflecting one single thread of solidarity.

Ashanti Ventura

Fending for Myself

By Rashad P.

A teenager can be judged based on looks. Young adults have no support, just people to watch them going through things, but maybe we just need people to talk to, for them to let us know things are going to be okay. People will judge you before they get to know you. Growing up as a Black man, people see bad things in you, such as robbing, stealing or shooting. We have to start to prove them wrong by showing and not telling.

For example, when I started the first year of high school, I would have to use the bathroom or get water constantly, but the teacher would ask me "why do you have to use the bathroom so much?" I asked to talk to her one-on-one, but she said, "no I'm teaching," I said, "okay so can I use the bathroom?" She said I could, after I told her why. I was confused. I said, "you don't have to be disrespectful." She continued to argue and harass me, and so I finally told her I have diabetes. The kids in the class heard me and decided to call me "Sugar Free" as a nickname for months. That was so embarrassing, especially because I was new there. Growing up as a child in foster care, teachers tend to treat you differently because they think it's hard growing up in foster care. It is, but sometimes foster kids would rather just forget about it. Growing up at high school, made me notice how you had to fend for yourself, from school fights, to cursing teachers, to transferring from school to school. But what I really realized is the only way you get through things is through God.

Awa Cisse

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the members of the Bronx Leadership & Organizing Center (BLOC) for leading this narrative change work around the cradle to prison pipeline in the Bronx.

Thank you to The Bronx Defenders Education Defense Project for supporting, engaging, and strategizing with BLOC throughout this project.

Thank you to Piper Anderson and Create Forward for creating a space for our storytellers to explore their stories and themselves.

Thank you to Robin Hood's Mobility LABs for the generous funding that enabled this project to flourish.

Special thanks to the students of Arturo A. Schomburg Satellite Academy Bronx, Principal Marsha Vernon & AP Kirsy W. Duvergé-Reyes for the healing justice art pictured throughout this book. The art was created in Studio 308 with Sara and laura marie.

Most importantly, thank you to the storytellers who have shared so much of yourselves throughout this process. We are a stronger, more powerful, and more honest community because of you.

Printed in June 2025

THE BRONX WRITES BACK: THE CRADLE TO PRISON PIPELINE is an anthology of stories, visual art, and poems written by and for Bronx youth. Each storyteller has experienced the pipeline differently: some have been arrested, others grew up in foster care, witnessed familial violence, or felt unsupported at school. The common thread is that each of these amazing storytellers is a survivor of cycles they should never have been through in the first place.

Bear witness as they reclaim their narratives and tell their stories in their own words.

BLOC
BRONX LEADERSHIP & ORGANIZING CENTER