

# *a fresh start*



Stories from the Writers at the  
Howard Area Community Center



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## SUMMER 2010 A FEW WORDS FROM THE HOWARD AREA COMMUNITY CENTER AND LITERACY WORKS

Fresh Start's participants show us every day the power a positive environment and strong work ethic can have on their success in re-entering the workforce. Participants struggle all the time with the guilt and embarrassment they feel when trying to explain a past conviction to an employer, but at Fresh Start, we teach people to be proud of what they can become and not dwell on the past. We as staff are reminded every day of the courage and determination our participants show in their road to becoming self-sufficient, and we feel privileged to be a part of their success. We want to thank Literacy Works' staff, Alison Szopinski and Betsy Rubin, for taking the time to come in and work with our participants and for allowing them to share their stories in a positive way through the Writers' Circle.

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Why do we write? We gain more control over our situations when we *see* our thoughts as words on the page. We can put a trouble on a piece of paper instead of leaving it trapped within ourselves. We better remember a joy if we write down every shining detail of the journey.

We also write to reach people. Our words may make someone think in a new way about their life. Our words may give someone comfort that they are not alone in their feelings or their struggles. Our words may inspire hope or determination. Maybe our words will convince someone to stand up for something that is right.

The writers at Howard Area's Fresh Start have written for themselves, but they have also written for you. If you are moved to write your own stories, the writers would say that it's hard work to write and revise and write again until you are telling your story in the most powerful way—but the effort is worth it.

We thank the staff at the Howard Area Community Center, especially Charles Hardwick and Jayden Whitney, for welcoming Literacy Works to the Fresh Start program. We thank Andy Collings for his stunning photography and Charlene Epple for her beautiful design work. Finally, we thank the participants in Literacy Works' Writers' Circle for inspiring us in our own lives and work.

### **Alison Szopinski & Betsy Rubin** Literacy Works

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*THIS PHOTO BY A. SZOPINSKI.*



## FRESH START AT THE HOWARD AREA COMMUNITY CENTER

The Howard Area Community Center's Fresh Start Program is an intensive four-week training that takes a holistic approach to job readiness for the formerly incarcerated. Men and women from all over the city and all kinds of backgrounds come to Fresh Start for just that, a fresh start. We believe everyone deserves a second chance at life, and we work hard with any individual willing to make the commitment to ensure a smooth transition back into the workforce. At Fresh Start, we offer computer training, resume writing workshops, anger management, mock interviews, job referrals, placement, and creative ways to talk to an employer about prior convictions.

The Howard Area Community Center was founded in 1967. In 2003, the Fresh Start Program was initiated by Charles Hardwick, Manager of the Howard Area Employment Resource Center, when he recognized the overwhelming need for a program for the formerly incarcerated in the Rogers Park area.

### Howard Area Community Center's Fresh Start Program

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## WRITERS' CIRCLE, SUMMER 2010

C.H.

Dean Gill

Danny Hampton

Latresea Johnson

John Carrasquillo

Conrad Gonzalez



C.H. 

### What Brought Me to Fresh Start

What brought me to Fresh Start is wanting to know what they provide and wondering what the outcome is going to be. I have this thirst for wanting to do better – to learn, to grow. There's never enough to know.

When I am done with Fresh Start, I hope to take whatever skills they have taught me and use them to my knowledge. It doesn't stop when you finish the program. No, it starts when you finish the program.

DEAN  
GILL 

### A Day I Will Never Forget

Three years ago, my son, who was eleven years old at the time, was going to his football practice just across the street from his school.



He stopped to drink some water at the fountain, and he was shot from a passing car. Even though it wasn't supposed to happen, I felt that he was lucky because if he wasn't bent over at the fountain, the bullet wouldn't have hit the fountain before it entered in his arm. The bullet didn't go through his armpit or into his body.

I will never forget that day because I lost an innocence that I never knew I had. I remember when his older sister came and told me that her baby brother was just shot. I was so scared I ran down the street in just my underwear. When I got to the school, I started yelling at him for no reason. The police told me he wasn't doing anything wrong – he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Even though I know that he went to play football with his teammates from school, I guess I was yelling because I was afraid. What is even scarier is the police telling me that my son was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. How can a park be the wrong place when that's where kids are supposed to play?



THIS PHOTO BY B. RUBIN.

DANNY  
HAMPTON 

### Travels

Shelly was the one girlfriend I had the most fun with. I have always liked the outdoors. When I was a kid growing up in McHenry, Illinois, I lived by the river and in the summertime we always had campfires and played outside.

I had known Shelly from high school and always liked her. She was short like me. So when I ran into her at Best Buy back in '96, it was fun

talking with her, we hit it off. We started doing things together.

Shelly was into yoga and eating healthy. I was having back problems from work and she taught me yoga. It worked – my back had healed. I still do yoga to this day and try to eat whole food.

Shelly and I went on trips all over the country, like the Florida Panhandle. We went to the Titanic Exhibit and saw the movie in Florida. It was the second best trip we took together. The number one trip was the Smoky Mountains ten-day trip at the end of May one year. We took peanut butter sandwiches, water, and fruit and hiked and looked at the scenery all day. We would get back to the campsite about 6:00 or 7:00 and be sleeping by dark.

We would go to all kinds of places closer to home, like Pictured Rocks, Northern Michigan on Lake Superior, a forty-mile park. There are a lot of places that you can get to in a three-to-four hour drive. We would get state park maps for Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan. There's a state park in Wisconsin we would go to a lot called Kettle Moraine South Unit. It only took about one hour to get there from Crystal Lake in McHenry County. It had Pine Tree Camp Sites, a glacier trail, and a beach at Whitewater Lake. There's a college in the town of Whitewater and we would see a lot of young people at the camp sites and lake. It was a lot of fun.

Shelly kept on me about eating red meat and how processed food was bad for me. She would have me read labels a lot, and I started to realize I was eating a bunch of chemicals. One day at Kettle Moraine, when we were together about one or two months, we stopped at a roadside bike rental that had a health food restaurant. She ordered us walnut loaf and sprout sandwiches. I was so surprised as I ate the first bite. So was she. We both looked at each other and said, "Wow, is this good." We were tired from hiking and had got home about 9:00 at night, had Breyer's Ice cream, and went to bed.

We had a lot of fun together, but, you see, drugs and alcohol got in the way. Shelly had a bad vodka and pill problem. I had problems with DUI's and missing work. After about three years, Shelly relapsed and shortly after that I started drinking again. We never got along when using. I felt like she was somebody else when she was using, and she was. I moved out and still saw her off and on for about a year and a half. I believe if we would have stayed sober we would still be together today. To this day I still think of our trips together. It makes me feel sad and happy at the same time.

### **My Fresh Start**

By being irresponsible with my life and things that I had – driver's license, apartment, and my own painting business – I had put myself in the penitentiary for a DUI. Luckily no one was hurt. Even though I feel I was not properly defended, things are working out for the best.

When Charles Hardwick from Fresh Start visited A Safe Haven, where I was staying in Chicago, I didn't give much thought to what he was saying. I was focused on going back to McHenry County to start my painting business at the end of the summer. Then my roommate started talking about the computer classes at the center. I have been wanting to take a computer class for quite some time now, actually years. Now all of the sudden my outlook on my future has changed. I must take my life and decisions day by day. If I plan too much, I could miss out on what God has planned for me and my future in life. So here I am in a writing class. God has brought me to this place (Howard Area Community Center). There are no coincidences.

It looks like my plan to start my painting business is going to happen. I talked to my landlady, Viola, and I'm moving back to Woodstock. Viola's not doing so good. She's 93 and is starting to have problems moving around her house. She's so stubborn, she won't use her cane and she is definitely not going to a nursing home. After I got thrown in jail, she never rented the apartment upstairs. My stuff is still up there. She only charges me \$400 a month rent. It's a studio with a kitchen and bath plus a screened-in porch. The porch is perfect for storing some of my painting tools and there is a basement I can store my ladder and larger equipment.

I've been thinking of how I am going to do things different: make my business more organized, plan jobs out better, and make sure I have plenty of time to finish before my next job. I used to be rushing all the time and cause too much stress. I'm going to keep my rent paid up two months in advance and make sure I have money saved for the off season. The off season is from around Christmas to the first of March. If I save, I can do fun things and enjoy the off time instead of struggling with bills and feeling worried all the time.

The key to all this is not to start using and drinking. If I start to drink a lot, I will not care about my business and start making just enough money to get by. That's not good for my life's all-around happiness. I've learned that money is not the key to happiness either. God in my life and depending on him gives me strength to move forward. Knowing that he's in charge gives me acceptance. If I can accept people, places, and things as the way it's supposed to be, then I can have peace and security in my life.





**LATRESEA  
JOHNSON**

### **My Neighborhood**

I grew up in low-income housing in Kansas, which some people would consider the hood. It was the kind of place where we borrowed sugar and milk from our neighbors. People didn't always get along, but they were there for each other. We stayed in a three-bedroom house from the time I was five until I was thirteen. It was my mom, granddaddy, two sisters, and one brother. I also had an uncle who was handicapped and would spend the night sometimes. He was funny and loved sweets.

Like many of the houses in the neighborhood, we had rats and roaches. I really didn't like for my friends to spend the night, but we still had a lot of fun. We used to play jump rope, have parties, and go to the candy store. I used to buy Boston Baked Beans, bubble gum, Laffy Taffy, and my favorite suckers, Slap Sticks. I was a cheerleader for the neighborhood football team and even won a trophy. When it would rain, my friends and I would take our shoes off and play in the driveway in the puddles. I remember we would have to come in before dark. My mom would come to the door and scream all our names. I would always be the last one and would get popped! My mom took pride in her garden, and I used to water it. That is something I enjoyed sharing with her.

Recently, since I have been here in Chicago, my neighborhood had a reunion that my brother attended. They had a barbecue at a park. My brother told me they had a successful turnout and a lot of people from

my old block came. No one from the old neighborhood stays there anymore. The neighborhood has changed a lot. The houses look better and there is a new playground. Now that I am here in Chicago, I miss the closeness I had growing up in Kansas.

### **When Dad Came**

I will never forget when my dad came to see me. I was five years old, and it was my first time meeting him. It was around Christmas time, and I can remember all the things I got: a jukebox, a doll, dishes, a bike, and games. He even got my sisters and brother things. It was one of the best Christmases I've ever had.

I remember waking up and he was going to preschool with me. He sat in on my class, and I was so happy. I felt like that day was my day. I got to actually tell the kids, "This is my dad and he's a social worker." For me, that was the greatest day! I never forgot the feeling that I had someone that actually cared. We had a relationship after that, and I got to spend the summer with him when I was eight and other summers after that. It was so exciting because I got to take trips to Disney World and Sea World and to family reunions.

### **On My Way – From Kansas to Chicago**

The day I left Kansas, I went to my mom's to get her for work and to see her before I left. My friend called and asked if I would like to go eat breakfast. I told him I was bringing Momma. My mom and I met him at Kimme's Kitchen. My momma had biscuits and gravy. I had French toast and my friend had French toast. The reason why it was important to me is because it was the day I was leaving. It was the last time I was going to be with my momma for a while.

It was funny because I didn't even have all my ticket money to leave! I was asking my friend if he could help me. All I needed was \$32. My friend told me, "Well, I bought you breakfast" so he gave me \$10. I was like, "Okay I need \$22 more, I don't care, I am leaving." I shared with him and my momma that I had to leave and I shed a few tears. I was telling them my struggles with staying clean and how important it was to leave today. I was waiting for my unemployment money, which usually comes on Wednesday, the day I was leaving. But God still makes a way. My mom then gave me \$10 so I was down to needing \$12.

I was on a mission for this \$12. I called and asked my brother. Really, I didn't think he would give it to me because I had borrowed money before. I went and got the money from him and told him I would send the money back. I bought my one-way ticket to Chicago and went to the bus station where family and friends came to see me off. All I had with me was two suitcases, two small bags, and some food.

When I finally got on the bus, I was thinking, "I am actually on my way to Chicago." As I got to Iowa I was praying, asking God to help me follow the right path. I was nervous inside, not knowing the outcome or what to expect. When I woke up at 5:30 am and we had made it to Chicago, I was looking out the bus and seeing all the tall buildings. I was happy and scared all in one. I was alone and I didn't know what I was going to face. I made it to the bus station around 6:00 am, and my ex didn't come pick me up until 9:00 am. I was getting nervous the entire time like I was stranded. I went to his aunt's place. I was like, "God, okay, be with me" and not knowing the outcome. I just prayed.



### **Moving On and Starting Over**

I have had to make choices since I've been here, including whether I was going to stay with my ex's aunt and not grow or move on. I made up my mind that I was going to move on, and I changed my living situation.

I have sacrificed a lot of things since coming to Chicago. I not only left family and friends but my car and home. I had a good job, but

unfortunately I lost it. I know coming to Fresh Start has helped me with some of the challenges that I am facing today. This had required a lot of patience and courage, especially because I am in a brand new city.

The things I do now since I am not working include getting up early and doing things that need to be done to be productive. I participated in employment training and this writing workshop, I have been figuring out transportation in Chicago, and I have been getting my things in order. I just got my new Illinois ID! I feel good about the choices I've made. I am staying in Chicago and I believe I have a purpose. I don't

know what it is yet, but I do have one and I don't want to give up.

I look at others whose lives haven't been easy, but they made it and didn't give up even when things were hard. That lets me know that no matter what I go through, I can do anything and be anybody I set my mind to.

I have had days where I was down and would be thinking about going back to Kansas. I know that wouldn't be a good idea. I do know that it would be in my best interest to stay in Chicago till I know for sure I am going back for the right reasons. I am not sure what those right reasons are yet, but I do know the wrong reasons. I would love to run back. But my mind is telling me the only way I am going to have peace is to stay away from Kansas and build myself up. I have been trying to focus on having patience and knowing that things are going to come in due time. I just want to stay up and not go back down. It's like I am on a mission at this point in my life. Those bad days I have are what the devil wants. I am happy in a good sense because I am clean and I am in my right mind. I feel the Lord wants it this way.

**JOHN  
CARRASQUILLO** 

### **A Memorable Day**

Last year during the summer, my then nine-year-old son, Jonathan, and I took a walk down by the beach in Evanston. We walked along the shore all the way north into Wilmette. We explored the Baha'i Temple. There we read information about many world religions, and we watched a movie about the Baha'i faith and the many other religions of the world.

My son, who is now ten years old, never forgets that day. He refers to it as our "world religion field trip" day, and he wants to make it a "regular" of our many things to do together.

What's so memorable to me is watching his eyes light up when we took in the views of the beautiful architecture and the beautiful scenery of Lake Michigan directly across the street.

Also, for a nine-year-old, he really seemed to be able to understand so much about the spiritual and religious aspects of our outing. I have since learned to enjoy many things in life "through his eyes." I'll never forget that day.

## Independence Day

On this Fourth of July day 2010, I was fortunate enough to spend a whole day basking in the joy of true freedom. Much of this true freedom that I experienced was in observing my children, myself, my wife, and my new neighbors enjoy this holiday in my backyard. My family being a functional unit was truly a beautiful thing!



**CONRAD  
GONZALEZ** 

### Transition in Life

The most dreaded part of looking for a job can be explaining about a felony conviction to a potential employer. Many ex-offenders that I have known never honestly answered the question. They drift in and out of

employment, staying with a job until the employer finds out through a background check, a call from a parole agent, or some other way. So I say to myself, "What will I do to make my job search and my employer want to hire me as an ex-offender?"

As I was told, honesty is the best policy, and I should show the skills and abilities that I have. I need to have a positive self-image and confidence in myself and that may show my employer that I'm the one he needs for the job. I always remember the two most critical factors to a successful job search are attitude and persistence. I'm marketing a product, myself, and I have to believe in the product (ME) in order to land a job.

I'm an ex-offender who has an early release program from the Federal Bureau of Prisons to reestablish myself in life. I had started a transition in life on how to stay free, and things did not look good at first, but there have been programs for me to take and I like them. Many people who prepare for release are unrealistic about what they are going to do and lack workable plans. As I was in federal prisons, I took the time to educate myself by taking vocational training programs and college

classes in small business management and welding. I got certificates from all the classes I took so that I may have a good chance in finding employment in life. I came to Fresh Start on hopes I will be able to find work and to learn job skills so I could start to do something good in my life and be able to leave the program I'm in so I can be with my family.

### Ceramic Life

When I was in a federal institution, we had to work a job that is given to us. Someone I knew on the outside had a friend that works there. He asked if I would like to work in the Ceramic Department, and I ended up working there for ten years. When I first started, I didn't know much about the program, but as time went by I started to love it. We made things like vases, bears, dolls, dogs, cats, and mugs using molds and slip, which is like mud. You then bake it in an oven to make it hard for glazing.

People didn't think that we could make things as nice as we did because of where we were at. Everyone I made things for loved them, including my family and my little niece. She was a part of my life and she could not wait for the box to come home because she knew that Uncle Conrad sent her something.

As time went by, I became good in ceramics, so they gave me a job as the instructor. I thought it would be good for me and that I could help the guys. It was my responsibility to see the men be happy and for their family to have smiles on their face too when they got a box from the place we were in. I had to create day-to-day schedules, and I taught 50 students at a time the basic techniques of creating ceramic molds. I demonstrated the use of hand tools to make sure they were being used safely, and I handled all aspects of equipment maintenance.

I became an excellent ceramic instructor with great communication skills because, as you know, where I came from, the guys there put this face on to be hard so no one would mess with them. But when it came to my ceramic program, they became someone who cared for their loved ones and worked hard to make nice things for their family. I knew I was doing a good thing because the guys would come up to me and say, "My kids or my mom love the things I sent them." The guy would smile.

So this was the work I did for many years and it made me a better person because I knew the guys that I helped would get letters from their family and it would make their time in prison go by faster. With my

skills in management, I could move forward in life.

Now that I'm home, I see the pieces I made at my sister's house. My niece showed me on a Sunday I was there, and she said, "Look, Uncle Conrad, these are the things you made me." It got me to smile and she was happy to show me. She had grown with the pieces and so have I.

### **A Wonderful Day**

I had a memorable day with a lady that I think I care about, and it was the first time I been with a lady out and about. I have been gone for a long time, so I haven't been out on a date in ten years. This was a very nice thing that I did in my life, a new life. We had fun and smiled a lot. We went to a mall, and I enjoyed being in a store to see things that I didn't see in a long time, like the kids running in the store and asking for things. I said to myself, "Kids ain't changed!"

After we finished shopping, we came out to look for something to eat. We walked around for a little bit and saw a Subway. We were about to go in and eat something, but then I saw a doorway with no windows. It had a sign on top of the door that said *Chinese Restaurant*, and I said, "Look, Chinese food." So we went inside and ordered some food. She had the shrimp with vegetables, I had the orange chicken, and we ordered some eggrolls. As our food came, we talked about things we want in life, and, as she knew about my past, what I like to do to be a good man and stay free in life. So we talked and ate our food, and that was a nice day because I cared about that time and that someone I was with. It made me think about how good it is on being free and having a fresh start in life.

### **Stay on the Block**

To do something good instead of something bad, we used to play sports. I would tell the kids, "What's up, let's play baseball." "Where would we play?" the kids would say. "Right here where all the cars are parked." So we took cardboard from boxes we found in the alley and made bases from them. We played and had fun running to get the ball and looking out for the cars so we would not hit them as we ran from base to base. We played ball until someone got hurt or a window got broke. People would see us having fun and come by and say, "Can we play?" and they did. The block was the place where the family can look

after their kids because sometimes being someplace else, even the next block, can be bad. The block was the place you would play and the family would know you were safe.

### **The Final Day**

As I find myself at the end of the Writers' Circle workshop, I found it very easy to lose myself in these classes. We talked about all kinds of things, time is short and I would like to write more. The people here have been great to me, and it has changed things for me in my life, by hearing the stories. The people kept my interest from beginning to end and were always realistic about the things we would write.

Using something bad to do something good is what I hope to do, so I may help someone to change their life, as well as the young people's minds to keep them off the street so they too may have a fresh start in doing good for themselves. For those who come home from prison, they too can have programs that exist here at the Howard Area Employment Center to help them in jobs and a better life.

Thank you for the time and may God bless you and your family. Keep positive things in your life for the better.



"A Fresh Start" is a result of Writers' Circle,  
an 8-week writing workshop created  
by Literacy Works in partnership with  
Howard Area Community Center.

***Literacy Works' mission is to fulfill the promise of a  
basic human right: the right to read, write,  
and interpret the world.***

To fulfill its mission, Literacy Works provides  
workshops, trainings and direct literacy services to  
50 agencies throughout the Chicago area.



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