

FREEDOM



BY CLASS 604 AT M.S./H.S 223

**The Laboratory School for
Finance & Technology**

FREEDOM

BY CLASS 604 AT M.S./H.S 223

**The Laboratory School for
Finance & Technology**



Behind the Book / New York

Behind the Book's mission is to develop engaged readers and writers in underserved NYC public schools by designing and delivering programs that are multi-disciplinary, culturally responsive, and promote deeper connections to books and their authors.

Visit us at www.behindthebook.org

© 2022 Behind the Book

Behind the Book • 216 West 135th Street • New York, NY 10030



Visiting Author: Janae Marks

Teachers: Garrett Kyle and Wendy Vasquez

Principal: Dr. Ramon Gonzalez

Program Liaison: Emily Haines

Volunteers:

Alexis August

Cameca Bacchus

Eric Lenkowitz

Nomi Schwartz

Program Coordinator: Lisa Gomez

Teaching Artist: Candice Humphries

Book Design Coordinator: Adriana Moreno

Book Designer: Julian Mahecha / Adriana Moreno

Printing: PDC Graphics; coordinated by Melissa Tessein

Special Thanks:

Huwe Burton from The Innocence Project

In the interest of honoring student voice, Behind the Book presents students' work as received from the teacher.

We would like to thank two of our generous funders: The Guru Krupa Foundation, whose contribution made this program possible, and The Korein Foundation, who supported the creation and publication of this class book.

Dedicated to the Innocence Project
for providing the wrongfully convicted
an opportunity to exert their rights to freedom.

About the Program



What can we do when the criminal justice system fails?

Mr. Kyle and Ms. Vasquez' 6th grade class began their exploration of wrongful convictions and incarceration of loved ones by reading *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* by Janae Marks. Zoe, the book's narrator, receives her first ever letter from her incarcerated father on her 12th birthday. She assumed he was guilty of a terrible crime but she learns that he was wrongfully convicted and then fights to prove his innocence.

To understand how families of people in prison feel, the class looked at photographs of people making a very long journey to visit their incarcerated loved ones in a collection by Jacobia Dahm called *The Prison Buses 2013-2014*.

Author Janae Marks visited the class and described her writing process. The students copied one of Zoe's activities by creating playlists to send to imaginary loved ones in prison to build and maintain a strong bond with them.





The students deepened their understanding of the failures of the judicial system through meeting Huwe Burton from The Innocence Project and learning about his wrongful conviction of murder, his 19-year imprisonment, and finally, his exoneration.

With the help of Behind the Book volunteers, the class studied cases of others who had been exonerated through the work of The Innocence Project. Students composed letters to them and shared how learning about their cases affected their views about the justice system and prison.

Led by Behind the Book teaching artist Candice Humphries, the class viewed and discussed artwork created by other exonerees and then created postcards to send them using symbolic images of support, hope, and activism.

Through reading about Zoe, interactions with the author, and exonerees, combined with their written and visual projects, Class 604 became involved in the issue of wrongful convictions and steps toward exoneration in very personal and profound ways.





CONTENTS

ISABELLE	8
LEILY	10
OUSMANE	11
MILANI	12
MAKAYLA	14
KENNETH	16
APRIL	18
GABRIEL G.	20
AISHA	22
CHRISTOPHER	24
ELIJAH D.	26
SAMAYA	27
YUREISY	28
LEILANI	30
GABRIELLA	32
ANALEE	33



BY ISABELLE

Dear Antonio Beaver,

I, Isabelle, am a sixth grade student. I attend The School of Finance and Technology in the Bronx. I like the color dark red because it's my birthstone color. I am also from New York and I live in the Bronx. My culture is Purtorican and Dominican. I love living in New York because there are so many stores all around the place and I can buy so many things.

What I recently learned from you is that you spent a decade in prison, with you being innocent. I figured that the witness was white, so since the justice system is so messed up they decided to arrest you. They also arrested you because the white woman accused you when you didn't look like the guy that did the crime. They just arrested you to arrest you, because the DNA testing was inaccurate. They just wanted to get someone locked up for the crime. I feel like the carjacking crime was planned because it was in a dark place and the man was wearing a disguise.





I wish I could have been your lawyer so I could research what happened and could have helped you and got the right guy in jail. Now I know that some people who go to jail are actually innocent. I feel bad because humans don't live forever. And a decade is a really long time for someone to be in jail when you didn't do anything.

Overall I was really interested in your case.

Sincerely,

Isabelle

BY LEILY

Dear Mr. Antonio Beaver,

My name is Leily and I am a student from MS 223 in the South Bronx. I live in the Bronx with my mom and my three siblings. Two things I want you to know about me is that I am a 6th grader. I am Hispanic. Also, I like to draw but I am not good at drawing so I just do it for fun.

I know that you are innocent because the DNA proved that you were innocent. I also know that racism played a big part in this because the description didn't match you but they still gave you 10 years. I'm really sorry this happened to you.

Sincerely,

Leily



BY OUSMANE

Dear Mr. Antonio Beaver,

My name is Ousmane and I am an African American. I am from the South Bronx. I play lacrosse for Harlem and I really like it. I like it because I'm very athletic and like playing with teammates because communication is key. Two things I like to share about me is that I can play every sport if I put my mind to it and I like watching Netflix.

I recently learned about your case through Behind the Book. I was very fascinated by the way things played out in your case because I think it's unfair that you did not get exonerated for something that you didn't perform. For example they took a DNA test and showed that you were not the victim.

Sincerely,

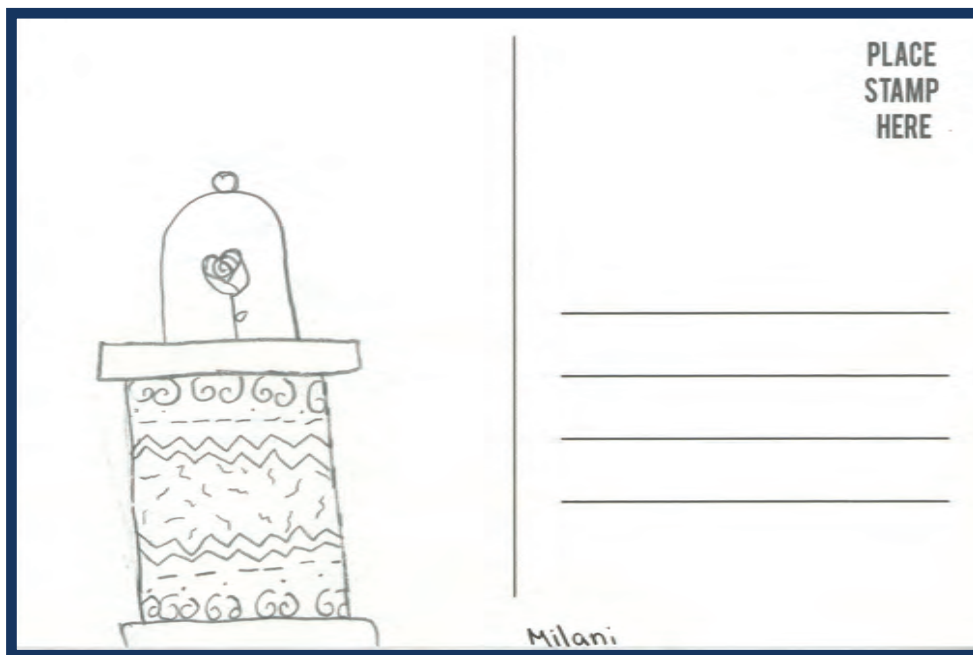
Ousmane



BY MILANI

Dear Mr. Antonio Beaver,

My name is Milani and I'm a student at The Finance and Technology School. I really like speaking about Racial Injustice and I like journaling. I also really like the South Bronx. Two things about me that I want to share with you is that when I'm older I want to be a Journalist so that I can spread light on people who are wrongfully convicted.





I recently learned about your case in Behind the Book. I was really interested in your case. I think it's highly unfair on how you were wrongfully convicted and the D.N.A test even proved that you were not the robber. The criminal justice system is highly racist and I think you should've got a lighter sentence after being proven innocent.

Sincerely,

Milani



BY MAKAYLA

Dear Ryan Matthews,

Hi, my name is Makayla and I am 11 years old and I live in the Bronx . Your story made me feel bad because I wouldn't like it if judges believed someone else without looking at real evidence.

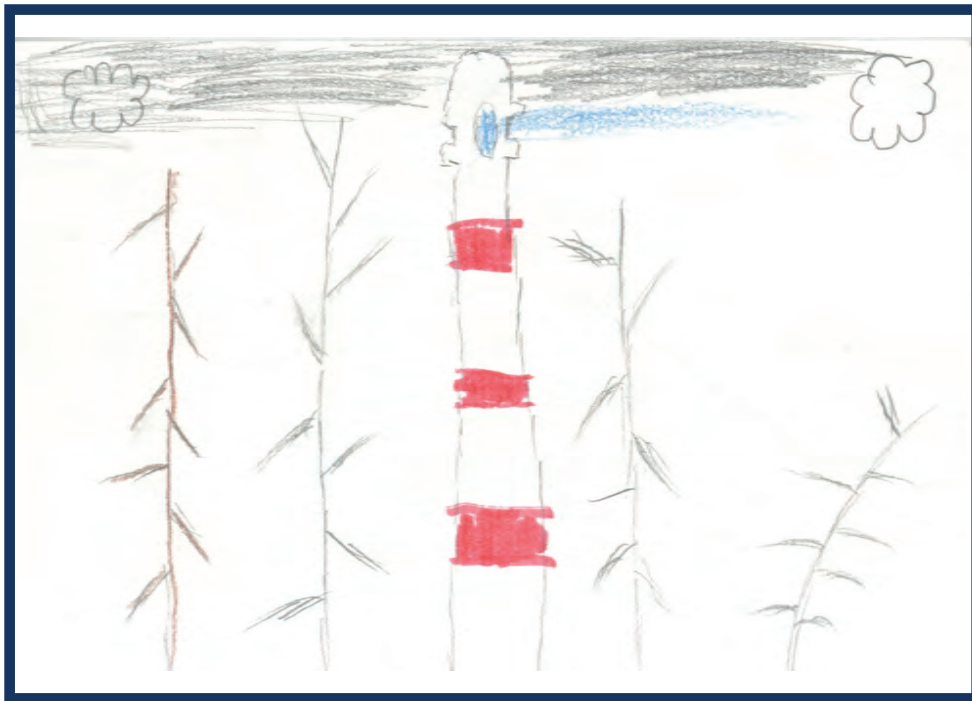
Something that your story told me about you is that you received a lot of money in compensation and in state compensation. Something else that I learned about you is that you went through multiple trials just to be released a few years later than when you were accused of being guilty. Which I find very wrong.

I feel like the justice system is bad because they assume things sometimes.

I hope you have a good year

Sincerely

Makayla



BY KENNETH

Dear Ryan,

It is a great pleasure for me to meet you (through letters). I am a student at MS223 in sixth grade. I want to be a software engineer and I live in the Bronx with my mom and dog named Luna.

Wow, your case is intriguing. How come they thought it was you even without DNA proof? The court put you in jail just because you were the same skin color as the actual thief. This is why I think that the justice system is broken and racist. Also, it's wrong to assume how someone thinks just because of their skin color.

Write back to me some time!

Sincerely,

Kenneth :)



BY APRIL

Dear Kevin Bailey,

My name is Abril. I prefer to be called April. So something about me is that I like to try to learn how to speak Japanese. I learned how to say It'll be alright in Japanese. "Daijoubu". I like to draw anime. I was watching an anime show I shouldn't be watching when I was a little girl. It was Attack on Titans that inspired me.

I read an article about you. I read an article that said you were accused of killing Lula Mae Woods. The police had evidence that you didn't kill Lula Mae Woods but they arrested you anyway which is not fair. I learned that you were in jail for 28 years and that you were questioned for 12 hours and it must be tiring.

What I learned about the criminal justice system is that it's corrupted. The police had evidence that you didn't kill the victim. They arrested you anyway and I found it unfair. I learned that black people were accused of killing people but they were innocent. They didn't care and they abused you. I am glad that you were out of prison.

Sincerely

April



DONT GIVE UP...

Believe IN
yourself...

自分を信じる

I tried to write it in
Japanese.....

BY GABRIEL G.

Dear Kevin,

Hello, my name is Gabriel. I'm 12 years old and I'm in 6th grade. I love to play video games and my favorite food is quesadillas. I found your case interesting on what happened to you. The detectives shouldn't have abused you and your friend just to tell lies. Thought officers should have been arrested as soon as they were abusing you. The evidence they found even proved that you hadn't committed that murder. All their evidence was corrupted.

Sincerely,

Gabriel



BY AISHA

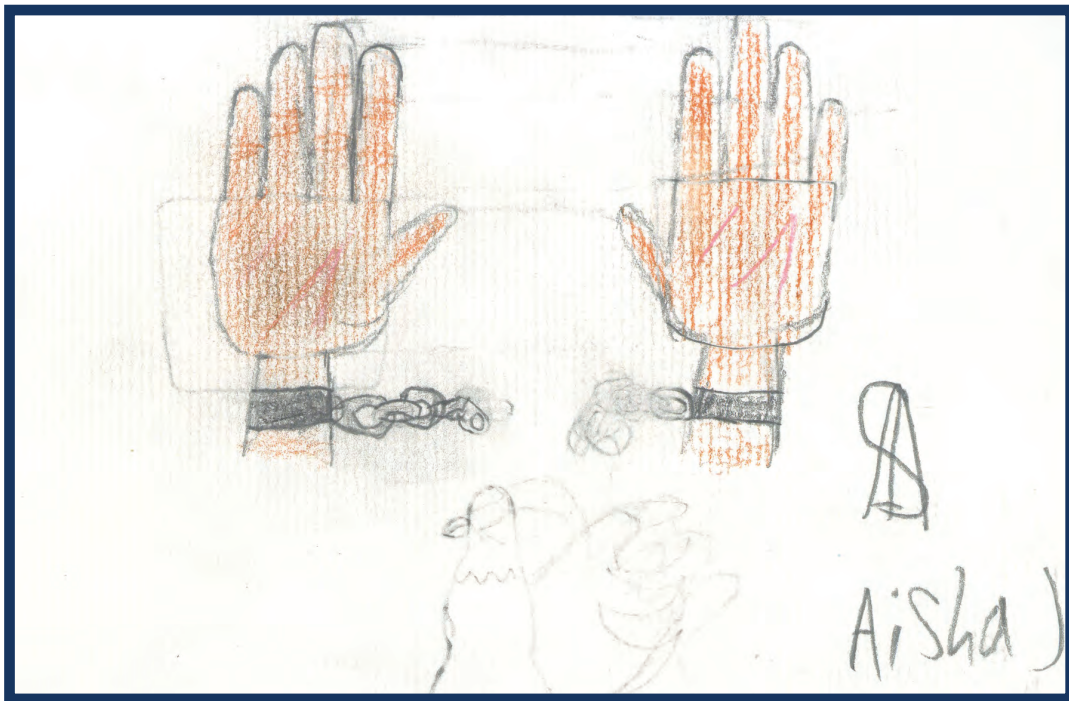
Dear Kevin Bailey,

My name is Aisha. I am confused all the time and forgetful. Some fun facts about me are that I have lived in New York, specifically South Bronx for 99.9% of my life, yet I have never gone to any tourist attractions before. Another fun fact about me is I am hungry all the time. I am hungry as I am writing this and probably will be hungry when you read this.

When I heard of your case I was in shock and disbelief because as a sympathetic person, I couldn't believe that a living, breathing human will ever go through what you went through. It made me think about how people still don't see some people as human just because someone wanted to be correct and thought that they couldn't be wrong. I can't imagine how it will feel to be accused of something as serious as murder and being punched and having a hand to my neck with someone forcing me to admit to it even if i didn't do it. I hope that whoever abused you to falsely admit will get what he deserves because even though I am very sympathetic, I also deeply believe in karma. I hope you live the rest of your life with no problems because I am praying no human would ever have to deal with that no matter who they are.

Sincerely,

Aisha

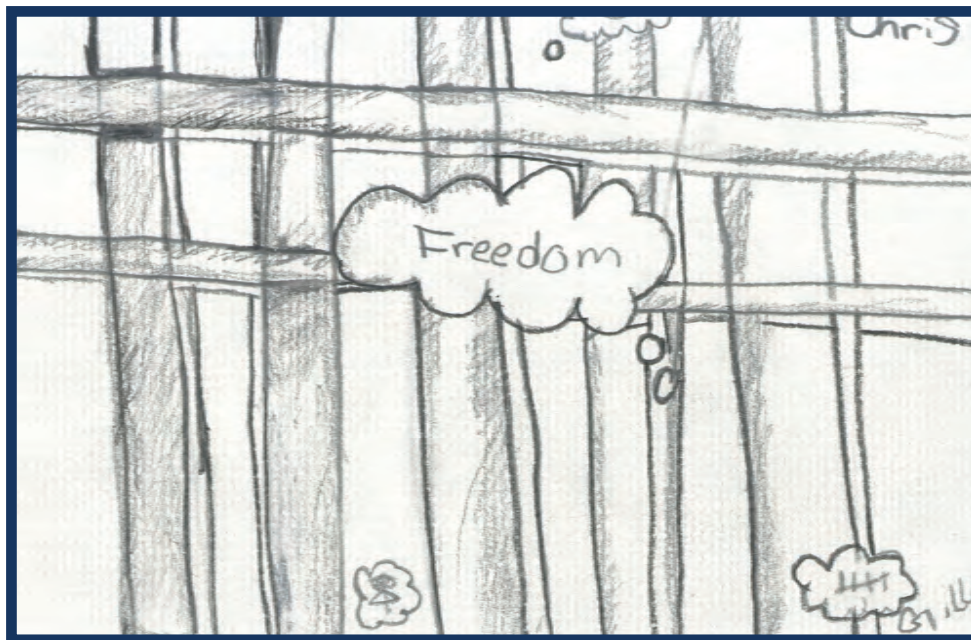


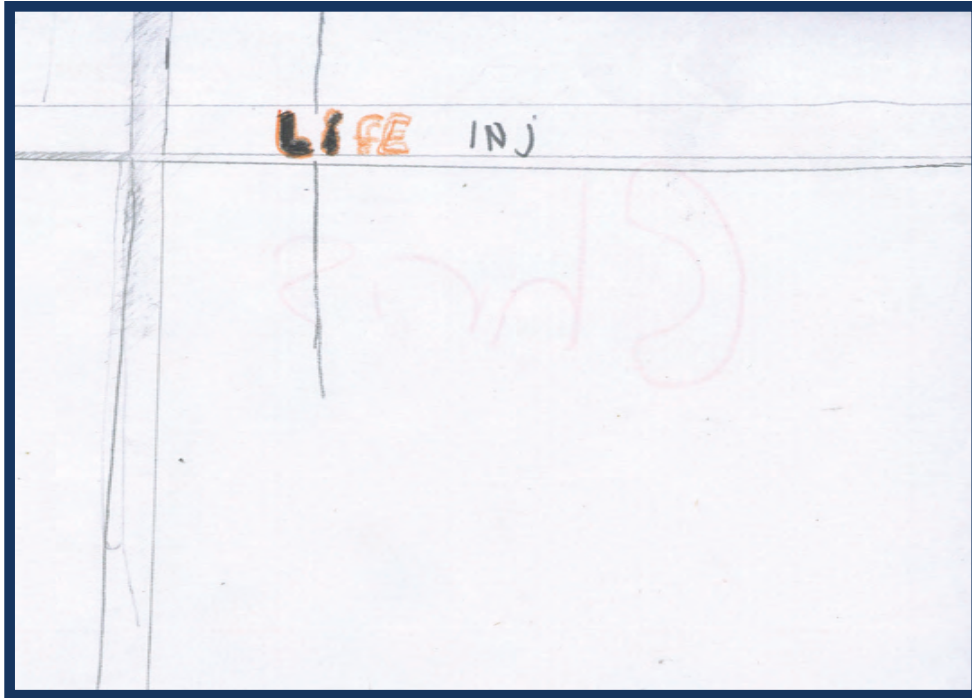
BY CHRISTOPHER

Dear Eric Kelly,

Hi Eric, my name is Christopher. I'm a student at MS223 In the South Bronx. Things about me I would like you to know is I like doing stuff that's fun to me and just fun to me. I would usually refuse to do something that I don't like and that's probably the only thing I do all day in my free time.

But as for you, I learned about you during Behind the Book and I received the article "Eric Kelly" . It told me you lived in New Jersey, served 22 years in jail, and the judge sentenced you for life due to a false DNA test. You were accused of a robbery. The interviewers used your short memory to make you admit to doing it. Which then led to you and Ralph being accused of being sentenced. Then you had to serve most of your teen life in jail instead of enjoying it. Is that true? Because I would really like to learn more about you and your perspective instead of believing fake news in an article about you. Based on the article it showed me the criminal justice system was not as advanced as it is now.





Before I finish writing this, I have just one question: Did you get offered to go back to school to learn certain stuff when you got arrested when you were young?

Sincerely,

Christopher

BY ELIJAH D.

Dear Eric Kelley and Ralph Lee,

I am Elijah, an MS 223 student in the South Bronx. I don't know why this had to happen, but I know you were wrongfully accused of a robbery and homicide. Let's go all the way back to 1993 in New Jersey, Tito Merino was murdered. You were linked to the murders until 1996, the police were interrogating you because they thought you were the one who committed those crimes.

They excluded using DNA, so there wasn't any evidence to prove your innocence any further. The only thing they had to use was a typewriter to note what you were saying, while you were arrested. Police were still investigating the murder weapon that was used to kill Tito,

I know what you're thinking. How do you know this? I read an article about you two. To be honest, I feel like the whole system was hard. It would be very shocking to be wrongfully accused even if you're minding your own business. If there was any piece of evidence that was false. Please inform me, I can't wait to hear your feedback, stay safe and Happy Holidays.

Elijah



BY SAMAYA

Dear Mr. Johnny Tallbear,

My name is Samaya. I am in the 6th grade at MS/HS 223 and I am also very interested in your case. When I grow up I would like to become a cardiothoracic surgeon. I would also like to attend Yale or Stanford University. After rereading the article I was very confused about how you ended up in jail. The blood sample got me confused about where the person who took the samples to get the DNA from the blood, which made me very upset. Not only were you accused of a murder that you didn't even commit, but you were also in a wheelchair when it happened. How did that not sum it up for them that you could barely walk?

When I read the article about you being exonerated I didn't get a perspective of you and how you felt and what you've been through. The whole entire article was about the case and how your trial went. This made me think that the criminal justice system is broken. I can't relate but I have a family member in prison for the exact same thing. His case hasn't been brought up yet although he was framed for murder. It hurts a lot sometimes but I don't let my sadness appear on me. I hope you are happy and healthy.

Sincerely,

Samaya



BY YUREISY

Dear Mr. Tallbear,

My name is Yureisy, and I am in 6th grade. I love art and I was born in the Dominican Republic. I am writing to you from New York. I've been reading a book called Zoe Washington, and it has some stuff about people being framed and going to prison for something they didn't do. I think that this is really unfair for you and everyone else who went to prison for something they didn't do.

I have read about your case and it made me think more about the criminal justice system. I learned that people can still be framed for a lot of stuff and the police won't always be right. In your case, someone saw somebody from really far away and the only evidence was that they saw someone who looked Indian and that they thought it was Talbear, since they knew him. The only thing they said was that they looked Indian. There was also evidence that goes against this because Talbear was in a wheelchair and just got surgery. There is also not just one Indian in the world. It also made me think more about how some cases don't have enough evidence, and that they should have better and more evidence. It also made me think that they should have better people to investigate the case because there was a lot of evidence that you weren't the one who committed the crime. The same for other cases.

Sincerely,

Yureisy



BY LEILANI

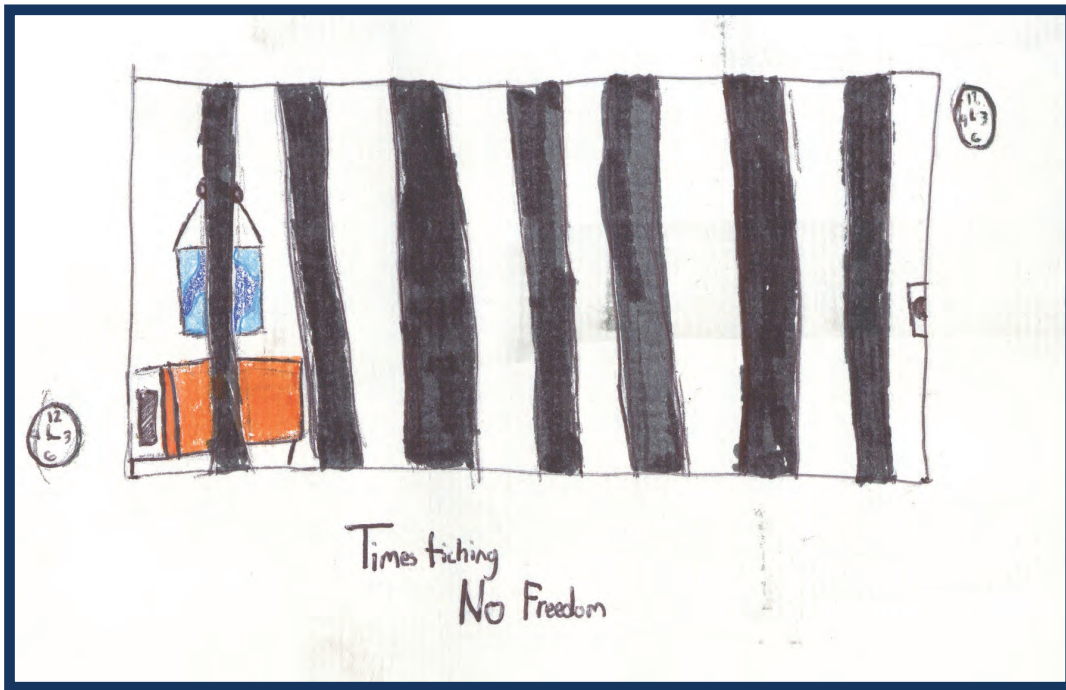
Dear Tall Bear,

My name is Leilani from MS223 in the Bronx. The Bronx is a nice place to live in. Once you get to stay there for a while you will see how good of a place it is. Two things to know about me is that I really like to play games and watch movies.

During the past few weeks we have been learning about people that were wrongfully accused. We were picked to read about your case. As I read about your case I learned more about you. I learned that you were in a wheelchair and got surgery on your leg making you not able to stand up and fight. But they thought that you fought him even though you were in a wheelchair which makes no sense. I also noticed that in your case they tested your blood but the person that tested the blood got your blood wrong and thought that you were there at the crime scene. I think that it is not fair that it took so long to realize that the blood test was wrong and they held you in for that. It wasn't fair that they held you in for that long for something that you didn't do. I'm really sorry that this happened to you.

Sincerely,

Leilani



BY GABRIELLA

Dear Jonny Tall Bear,

My name is Gabriella, and I'm in 6th grade at MS223, I live in the South Bronx. I can't relate to your story but something that I would like you to know about me is that I would like to be a meteorologist or a journalist. I would like to go to Yale University.

I recently learned about your case through Behind the Book. I thought it was interesting because I never thought that something like this can turn into somebody going into prison for 26 years. I think that it's crazy how you didn't get a say in this because all they did was assume and on top of that put out false DNA. I think that it's crazy because like I said you didn't get a say in this which is not fair.

Something that impacted me about this is that the fact that the blood test was wrong and that lady just kept putting false information out there is crazy. Where did this lady even get the 3rd blood test from if there were only two people? I think the whole story was interesting and was confusing as well.

Sincerely,

Gabriella



BY ANALEE

Dear Tall Bear,

My name is Analee and I'm a 6th grade student at MS223 in the South Bronx. I really like being a student in this community because my teachers and I had some of the same experiences. Two things I'd like to share about me is that I have been practicing Skateboarding and learning to do tricks and I also like to paint and sketch.

I recently learned about your case through Behind the Book. I was very intrigued by the way things played out in your case because I think it was unfair that you were accused of a crime you did not commit. According to the article I read, you were in a Wheelchair. A crime you couldn't do or be the victim of because of this. Also because they just accused you of being a murderer a crime you didn't do because you were in a wheelchair. Also they just accused you instead of not having proof of you being a murderer. You were innocent your entire life and the only proof they had was the DNA test that proved you didn't commit the crime and were innocent the entire time.

Sincerely,

Analee



About the Visiting Author



Janae Marks is an author of middle grade novels. Her debut *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* is an indie bestseller and was named a Best Book of the Year by Parents Magazine, Book Riot, Kirkus Reviews, Booklist, Chicago Public Library, and The Boston Globe. Her second novel is *A Soft Place to Land*. She has an MFA in Writing for Children from The New School, and lives in Connecticut with her family. Visit Janae online at janaemarks.com.





About the Student Authors

The students in **Class 604** are a group of kids that are not afraid to advocate for others as well as themselves. They are a united group with admirable personalities. This can be seen throughout every step of their work.



About Behind the Book



Behind the Book brings authors and their books into classrooms to build literacy skills and foster a community of lifelong readers and writers. Working with classes from Pre-K through 12th grade, our series of workshops is designed to bring books to life and inspire students to reach their full potential. Behind the Book is embedded in the class curriculum, nurtures critical thinking, creativity, and self-confidence in New York City public school students. All programs meet the Next Generation Learning Standards.

Next Generation Learning Standards Addressed



6R1: Cite textual evidence to support an analysis of what the text says explicitly/implicitly and make logical inferences. (RI&RL)

6R3: In literary texts, describe how events unfold, as well as how characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution. (RL)

6W4: Create a poem, story, play, artwork, or other response to a text, author, theme, or personal experience.



Behind the Book

**BtB empowers the next generation of readers
and writers by nurturing critical thinking,
creativity, and self-confidence in our students.**



Behind the Book

www.behindthebook.org