

# BENT BARS PROJECT

a letter-writing project for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, gender-variant, intersex, and queer prisoners in Britain



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## Welcome to the third Bent Bars Newsletter!

Once again we have received a fantastic range of writing, poetry and artwork, which we are very excited to share with you. This issue covers topics ranging from pride and vulnerability, strength and survival, dealing with loss, passing time and resisting isolation. Some of you have written about your gender journeys, your experiences with family, overcoming self harm and dealing with homophobia. Others have written about friendship, discovery and support inside.

So a great big thank you to all who shared your writing. We hope this newsletter reflects the thoughts and ideas that are being experienced inside.

For new readers, this newsletter is written by and for prisoners who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender non-conforming, intersex or queer (LGBTQ). We aim to create space for LGBTQ prisoner voices to be heard and to provide an opportunity for people inside to share experiences with each other.

The Bent Bars Project runs a penpal scheme for LGBTQ

identified people inside and outside prison, and this year has seen the project grow in numbers and in ambition! We receive new requests every week and aim to match penpals as quickly as we can. If you would like a penpal, please drop us a line.

There have been a few changes in the Bent Bars Collective this year, and we sadly had to say goodbye to Cecilia who moved out of Britain, but who continues to be involved in editing the newsletter. We've had many new volunteers getting involved, which has helped to keep the project going, and who have brought lots of new enthusiasm to the project.

Bent Bars has also been busy raising awareness in the community through a number of events and stalls. Last autumn, Bent Bars participated in the Leeds Queer Film Festival and in May co-hosted a film and discussion night in Bristol. Also in May, Bent Bars participated in an event in London called Building Alliances Against Criminalisation, which was organised by a Bent Bars volunteer. This summer Bent Bars held a stall at London Pride and Brighton Pride, introducing the project to new people and

raising awareness of the importance of connecting communities. We have more events planned for the upcoming autumn and spring in Leeds, Bristol, Brighton and London.

Thanks again to all of you who have made contact with the Bent Bars project. We admire your courage, resistance, and resilience in finding ways to be yourself in an environment that is often hostile or risky for LGBTQ people. We have had some great contributions in this newsletter about staying safe, keeping true to yourself, feeling proud and coping with struggle. We really appreciate the energy it takes to keep positive, and we recognise that there are many more people inside that we haven't met or who remain private. This newsletter is for all of you.

If you have any comments, responses, or ideas we'd love to hear them. Keep heads held high in the knowledge that there are many others inside and outside who join you and support you in solidarity.

**From your friends at the Bent Bars Collective.**



## Big Frank on Friendship

**During** my sentence I have had many mates all of whom I value in their own way.

Those I consider to have been true friends, though few, have been invaluable. I can say with confidence that without some of them I wouldn't be here today.

Given the close quarters of prison living friendships are vital and tend to be closer and more valued than in the outside world

Being a long way from home and not seeing my family as often as I would like creates a void. My friends fill that void. In here my friends are my family; they are the ones I turn for support when I'm struggling to cope. They are the ones I laugh with and very occasionally the ones I cry with. They can also be the ones I get most frustrated, the ones I snap at, but only because they mean so much to me. Luckily they can cope with my bad days and don't take any offence!

My friends can be the ones, who are able to hurt me most, but true friendship involves making yourself vulnerable to that hurt and the benefits far outweigh the cost.

I mentioned earlier that without some of them I wouldn't be here today. I'm not proud to say that suicide has crossed my

mind several times during my sentence and my mates have always been there to help bring me through those dark days.

When I self-harmed, my best friend was the only one I could tell. Like a true friend he was there for me and wouldn't let me give up. He helped me to see that I could have a future, providing that I was willing to fight for it.

My friends have helped to shape the man that I am today and believe me I've needed some shaping over the years.

Friends are a vitally important part of prison life and I for one wouldn't want to serve my sentence without them.

At some point everyone will need a mate to learn on, choose carefully but make sure you have someone. And depression fuelled mood swings aside, I think I'm pretty good friends to my mates as well!

Just being there for someone; listening to them; offering a little advice it can make a huge difference. Many friends have played their part in helping me to this stage of my sentence and in making me the man I am. To all of them I am grateful and only hope that I have helped them in some small way too! □

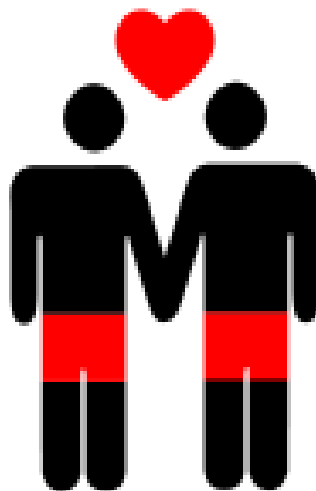
To Bent Bars,

I hope this letter is not too strong for the next issue of the newsletter: after reading this month's Autumn Issue I felt the urge to write this for the likes of people like Ian who have come strong because of the previous issue. I felt so proud that he had the courage to open up about the struggle that himself as a black gay man goes through. I know because I have just set or should i say founded the first gay forum for in my prison. I will speak more about this in my next letter.

### **Fight a New Fight From Michael**

Thank you for the newsletter I received last week. It was very good reading. It was one of the stories that caught my eye, that was written by a guy called Ian, called My Coming Out. It was nice to read a story of someone's life who is from the same black culture and who sees the struggles of being black and gay. It was also good to hear how he grew strong in himself. I previously wrote about my life in the last Bent Bars newsletter about myself coming out in prison and also the cultural backlash I had to deal with over the years outside of prison, and how I was afraid to come out in prison because of not only being gay but being black and gay. I was mostly afraid of the guys of my own culture who would use such words as batty boy, nastiness and many more words. I guess this is why most black gay men and women struggle to come out of closets, because of the stigma that follows after you have revealed yourself as the person you are. You see, I really struggle with this separated isolation of one's culture. I spent years studying

black American history, also African history and cultures just to understand the struggles many had to go through to be free and also to be accepted for who they had the right to be, and that is humans. So I cannot understand how we fought in the past to be accepted and now we're fighting to be accepted within our own culture of people, just to be



free to be who we are as gay black men and women. Yes I know some people see this as a different fight but fighting for our human right is to me the same fight.

So the reason behind this letter is to just encourage other gay black men and women inside and outside of prison who may be living their lives in hiding because of the fears of what their

family and friends may say about their sexuality or even try to tell you that you will bring shame upon the family or the black culture just to give you a guilt trip. Don't let this happen. You see, if people or those close to you cannot accept you for who you are then that is their issue, as long as you can accept yourselves for who you are that's what really matters. You see, they have to deal with it, not you: no-one's living your life but you so I really encourage my brothers and sisters to seek the help: write to the Bent Bars project and other agencies. Don't sit alone. Don't let yourself become isolated, because there are many people like yourselves outside and inside prison who feel they might not be accepted if they come out. yes we may have to fight a new fight but remember it's only you who can make the choice for your own direction in life, so be who you are, be proud. You're not evil, you're not alien, you are somebody. Remember the truth can set your hearts free if only you want it to be, so stand strong and my last words: nothing bad lasts forever.



From Tristan

Hi B.B. team,

Just read the newsletter you have sent me, actually I must have scanned it 4 or 5 times and I must admit it is a very good read and it made me feel sad at times because of the hardship of other people. I guess it brought home the problems that I faced throughout my life and in particular when I came to prison and to be known as the gay guy on the wing. I'd love to tell my story of how it was for me when I first came in prison and how I am today. Maybe my story can help fellow LGBTQ people who find themselves in the same situation I once did. Anyway, here is my story.

I'm Tristan, on a bus to HM Prison. I'd just been given 4 years by a judge. I'm thinking what am I going to do. I'm so scared as I'd heard stories about prison. As a gay man I'm thinking oh my God, my life is going to be Hell. When I actually got on to the main wing I came across lads who I knew from the area that I lived and also lads I'd gone to school with. These lads all knew I was openly gay. I was nervous and at the same time scared.

The news of my arrival as being "gay" spread like wild fire. As a result some lads, in fact most of the lads were ok with me. There were the odd one or two who totally set out to discriminate me with name-calling, the usual homophobic, narrow-minded people that still live in society today. Being that prison is an alpha male dominated place anyway didn't help. Anyway, I didn't lie down and take the abuse I stood up and continued being the proud open gay man that I was. I didn't let it show that it bothered me at times. I continued to walk around with a smile on my face and my head held high.

I tended to socialise with the people who took me for what I was. Eventually I became part of the furniture and eventually people just accepted I was gay and I became yesterday's news. I did eventually move prison and had to go through it all again at my current prison.



I'm now the LGBT rep for the prison. Hopefully trying to educate the jail to the life of a gay man and hopefully it will become a less homophobic place for future gay men. I'm proud to be gay and I admit it has been hard but I've been confident to be true to who I am in prison.



**From Ronald**

**GLAD**  
Gay Lads Against Discrimination

Dear Bent Bars,

Thank you for the second newsletter. I was most interested in the articles and poems within. You did ask for feedback after the first one, if I may I will combine the two together and pass on my comments. I was very much uplifted by both newsletters and went along with a lot that was said by guys writing in. I felt like some of the guys: should I come out or stay in the closet, I in the end came out. I joined a group of guys run by a lady officer: it's called GLAD Gay Lads Against Discrimination. We meet as often as is possible, depending on when the officer can make it. I did mention in my last letter about the group so if I repeat I am sorry. There are about fifteen at present, but it changes as people move or are released, we discuss any issues people may have, what we are able to have regarding mags, books or any material (if you have any advice or contacts will be very grateful for information.) I see you are making a Directory, which will be great. We don't have a newsletter as yet but hopefully may have in time. It's just great to meet other guys, I will keep you informed how we progress.

I was very interested in the poems you printed. I would like to send you a poem which was given to me by a guy I have great respect for, and would like to make my partner at some stage. I was amazed one day when he told me he had a poem for me of how he felt. he said he had written it, I don't mind one way or the other, the words just mean so much to me of how he felt. I am going to share it with you, the title:



**So Lucky To Have Found You**

Once in a lifetime  
You find someone  
Who touches not only your heart  
But also your soul

Once in a lifetime  
You discover someone  
Who stands beside you  
Not over you

You find someone  
Who loves you for who you are  
And not for who you could be

Once in a lifetime  
If you're lucky  
You find someone . . .  
As I have found you.





# Poetry is resistance

## (resistance is poetic)



### *What's happening?* By MacNutt

*I lie awake asking myself  
What's beyond the wall?  
Standing over 10 foot tall  
What can I see  
An industrial state  
A choppy sea  
Lot's of boats  
None of them afloat  
When I listen I hear  
Squawking  
A feeding frenzy to you and me  
Beeping  
A truck reversing  
Dragging and thumping  
Truck's unloading  
Goodness knows what  
The time is nearly three  
The best time for me  
Soon I'll be free  
Able to see  
What's going on?  
Beyond that wall  
Standing 10 foot tall.*

Hello my friends,  
How are you doing?

I read the newsletter and it really opened my eyes to people's different views on the different kinds of sexuality. I didn't realise people had so many different views I thought everyone thought the same. I've always struggled with my sexuality since I came out when I was 18, I have days when I feel straight and some days when I feel 100% gay even though I'm bisexual. At the moment in my life I don't know what I'm doing or what my sexuality is and I have days when I just want it all to disappear as I can't cope with it all.

I have put a poem in my letter so you have a rough idea of how I'm feeling.

"Batty Man", "Poof", You name it  
I've been called it,  
The teasing and torment for six months  
I stalled it

At the start I pretended I was straight with a nice blonde girl whose physique was great, but one day like a knob I let it slide. I said I had a boyfriend on the outside. It was a mistake yea, but to tell you the truth it was worth the punches, kicks and snapped tooth, because now I can say, scream out loud I am gay, happy and proud

Well my friends I'll close for now but I hope to hear from you soon.  
Best wishes,  
Gary.

## Tomorrow Never Comes by Macnutt

Forget what others will say,  
No matter where you come fae,  
Rejoice, announce that you're 'glad to be gay',  
Enjoy the Suns rays,  
A frolic in the hay,  
Forget about waiting until spring,  
Do the right thing,  
Think about the joy it will bring,  
Have fun, come out and play,  
Take a stand, it's time to stay,  
Do it now, Do it Today.

Remember that this is a work of fiction. It is not an instruction list. If you feel comfortable in your own skin then tell your kin. Do not put your life in danger. The world isn't the kind of place to say out loud 'I am what I am' but it's getting better every day. Just be yourself, and wait until you are ready before leaving "Narnia" and announcing to the Big Bad World that you are "a friend of Dorothy". Watch Beautiful Thing and Get real. Sing along to Mama Cass in secret until it's safe to do it in public. Now Jazz hands.



"Be free", Artwork by Santiago Armengod & Thea Gahr

## What I feel?

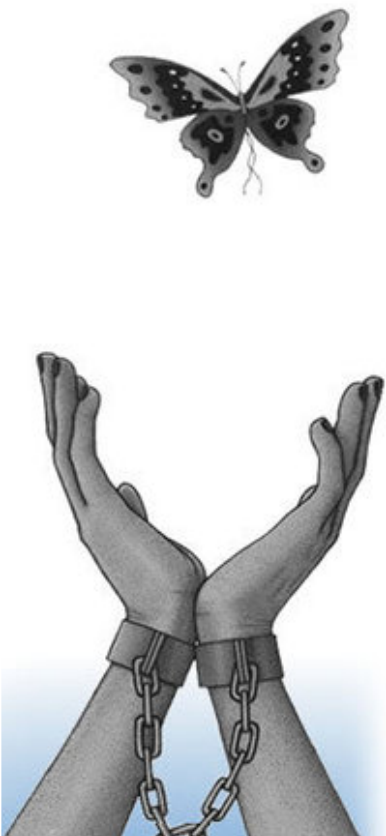
by **Barrie**

Whether I feel unhappy  
Even if I want to cry  
I will not be beaten  
By thoughts that I want to die

Everyday is a struggle you'll see  
I want what's best for only me  
No-one wants to end up in trouble  
No-one wants to end up in strife  
Yet for me, these are the things  
I've encountered all my life

People telling me what to do  
Or telling me, how I should look  
They don't want to hear my story  
But judge me, by a book,

They ask me questions about my life  
And why it is, I have no wife  
My answer to those people I say  
"I'M OUT, I'M LOUD, I'M VERY PROUD"  
And yes "I'M 100% GAY".



## Secret Within

by **Zoe**

Man or woman I didn't really know,  
But now I know which path to go,  
Many years of feeling trapped inside,  
But no longer now will I have to hide.

The Journey is clear in body and mind,  
at the end of the Journey my true self I'll  
find, the years of torment are now behind,  
few people are friendly and some still unkind.

I've now spoken out and people hear my voice,  
They now understand that this is my choice,

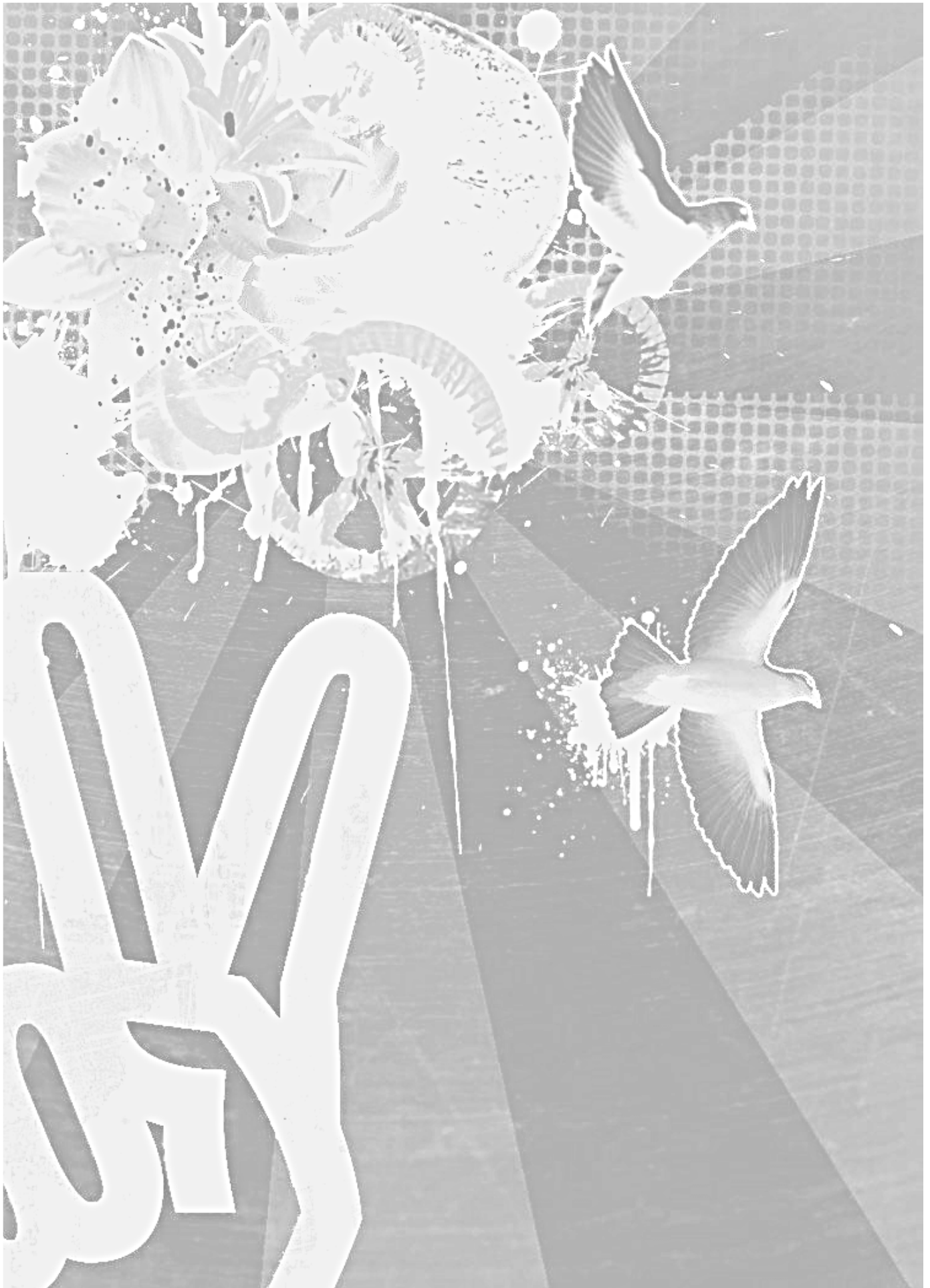
The wheels are in motion, the Journey has begun  
With my heart truly open life can now be fun.

Society condemned me I didn't have a chance,  
With my new lease of life I feel I could dance,  
respect and acceptance is all that I ask,  
I hope that people don't find this too much of a task.

Regret and heartache, many times with these  
feelings, much time I have spent,  
the battle has been hard but now I'm  
much more content.

Through no fault of my own did I enter  
this earth,  
knowing such a mistake had been made at my birth.





**Outside,**  
**by Barrie**

**Outside the sun is shining bright  
In a clear blue sky, are clouds of white  
Birds, insects and butterflies all around  
Cut grass is blowing on the ground,**

**Leaves of plants, swaying in the breeze  
Followed gently by the rustle of trees  
Outside, the warm sun can be seen  
Glistening on the lawns so green,**

**People lying in the sun  
Children playing, having fun  
Lots of things to do and say  
Like gardening on a summers day,**

**Clothes are seen, hanging on the line  
On a hot day, that's dry and fine  
Resting, relaxing, soaking up the sun  
"Yippee", at last it summer  
Let us all have fun,**

**No grey clouds can we see  
Happy and content are we.**







## UNTITLED

By Ken

Time is but a painful phase  
When loneliness takes hold  
You wait and listen for a call  
Alone, afraid and cold.

The days are empty, night drag along  
The daily routine goes on and on  
You sit and ponder, wondering why  
No one sees or hears from you.

Remembering the yesterdays  
And youthful days of bliss  
Your lonely tears again befall  
Pained by family and friends you miss.

You watch and listen to the clock  
You toss and turn always sad  
In silence suffering alone  
A victim of our justice system

## 'I can't buy me love' From Dave

The only kind of love that is literally for sale is the euphemistic kind which rock singers can't get enough of and which Aerosmith sang about enjoying in that most romantic of locations, an elevator. True love, whatever that is, obviously has no price tag. Does that mean that wealth has no influence at all on whether our love lives flourish or not? It is easy to think that only other people sillier than ourselves allow materialist considerations to influence their choice of life partner. But there is plenty of evidence to suggest that, consciously or not, cash does come into the equation.

Those men who think that having the right car, watch or clothes will have an effect on how men or women perceive them are not wholly mistaken. The troubling thought is that although not many are so transparently materialistic that they consciously think 'he drives an Audi- good husband potential,' few of us are so pure in our motives that power, wealth and beauty do not have some bearing on our choice of mate. And if we want to say that anyone influenced by such factors cannot truly be in love, then love is even rarer than we think it is. Money can't buy you love, but sadly it might just help shift the odds in your favour.

Pay for love with love not money.





## A New Freedom - By Chris

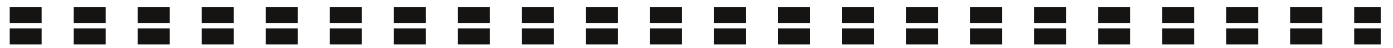
I was released January this year, I did not 'fit in' with other inmates in the prison, I was trapped in my own 'prison' my shell, it was a living hell at times, it all depends if your 'face fits' or not to how one is treated in that place by staff as well as inmates! I have come out of that hell hole a stronger person in mind and spirit.

I had got to a stage where I could not look at my chest, they serve no purpose in my life and in prison everywhere I looked was a reminder of how trapped I felt with my T's, but I did share how I felt with a F to M friend, who'd had a chest reconstruction, he'd had some binders which I use t-shirt binders which were comfortable to wear, most importantly did the job of hiding my shape and look more flat chested giving me more confidence about how I look, I also learnt it's very expensive and I could never afford to have them removed privately, and am struggling with the GP finding one willing to refer me to the clinic for counselling, so I'm soon changing GP and say how much I need counselling, I have been binding comfortably for about 2 months now, and will do until something is done, and talking few years yet as the NHS transitioning is difficult to do, I also was told not all surgery is offered on the NHS. I spent more of my discharge grant in mens department in Primark. April 19th I took the next stage of changing my name legally, Chris, I had to give copies of my name deed to different people like bank, benefits and automatically my correspondence from them addressed me as 'MR' so it's a good job I have the binder to hide the T's, so now I have to make sure my

shape is hidden, new challenge and life is on the way, living as a man best I can.

I do have a good support network with CMHT workers for first 6 months of being released aiming to reduce support to independent living with out CMHT, they've also helped me build a better relationship with my father, he was not surprised by the change of name, although I was worried at first how he'd react, he does naturally have his own personal views which he doesn't share and just wants me to be happy but it will take family members quite some time to adjust to the name change. I also have been going to a LGBT social group in Surrey which meets once a month in a coffee shop, I've been a few times, as it's in evening and it's quite a way from where I live. I'm looking forward to going to Brighton Pride this year, to celebrate my new life! ♦





# REAL VOICES

Thank you to Matthew for sending us this from 'Real Voices':

## PRISON: MORE EQUAL FOR SOME THAN OTHERS?

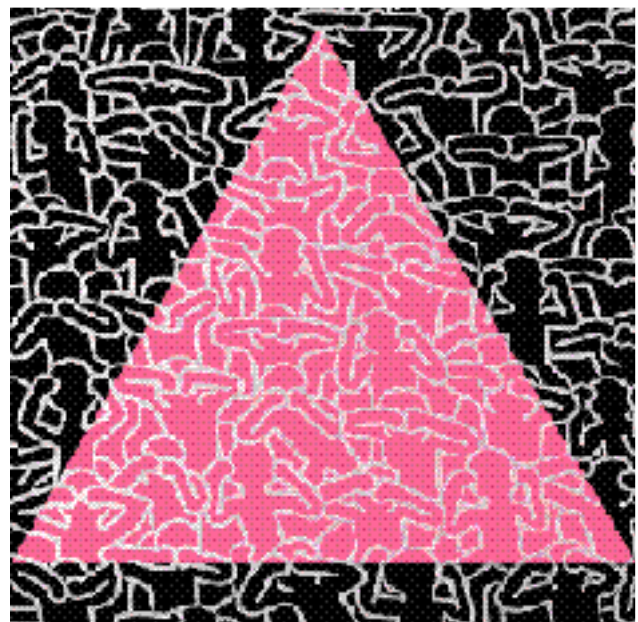
Isn't it nice being able to walk around the prison, being yourself and not having to hide behind a mask? Looking fellow prisoners in the eye as you exchange pleasantries as you pass by and not having to keep your head down as you shuffle through the corridors, dreading that you might be singled out and bullied or, at worst, attacked. This is all very well if you confirm to the stereotype of a 'normal prisoner.' However, this is largely a dream scenario for at least ten percent of your fellow peers. Why? They don't conform. They're cast from a different mould. They're gay.

Using the age-old statistic of 1 in 10 people being gay, that means that out of the 80,000 prisoners in the U.K. at least 8,000 are gay. That's before you consider bisexual, bi-curious, trans-gender, intersex and 'prison gay' PRISONERS. Yet in practical terms as far as the Prison Service is concerned, they do not exist. Well, not until just recently when recognizing homosexuality in prison became one of the Prison Service's dynamic new strategies.

Recognising homosexuality in prison is one thing, but providing equal rights, privileges and opportunities, it seems, is quite another. One of the first areas you notice the lack of equality stares down at you from most prison cell walls- or not, as the case may be- the heterosexual community within male prisons can currently order from a list of eight adult magazines. How many magazines are on the list for gay prisoners? Correct: none. Why? It's simple; as with most things the Prison Service is way behind the rest of the civilized world (more commonly known as 'The Out') in catching up with the changes in the law. Despite there being a significant amendments to obscene publications legislation, permitting hasn't read that page in the statutes yet.

Some- if not all- establishments now provide condoms and lubricant to those brave enough to ask for them via the Healthcare department. And some establishments will turn a blind eye to consensual sexual activity, provided it takes place after bang-up (no pun intended.) However, homophobia amongst both prisoners and staff remains rife. It is not uncommon for a prisoner to be refused permission to share a cell with someone if the staff feel homophobic, censors to withhold (or 'accidentally misplace') incoming mail if it's of a homosexual nature and/or includes photographs of males- even candid, fully-clothed shots of friends, partners or family.

If you are gay, the likelihood in most prisons is that you will be advised to go under the protection of rule 45. Although the comparative safety this affords may allow the prisoners to feel safer being themselves: it does nothing to combat the bigotry, the prejudice that is inherent in every establishment around the country. Only integration and a zero tolerance stance on any form of bullying (including perceived) from either prisoners or staff will begin to break down barriers. Just because the prisoners may be gay that should not automatically make them a vulnerable prisoner. Rule 45 should be on offer but not a necessity.





Dear massive, collective,

Hi, Jason here at my new prison. Please feel free to publish this letter's contents. But I feel that I have to stand by your comments in your 2nd Newsletter about keeping people's names out of publications.

Here's why: As you and the prisoners that have met me at previous establishments will know, I'm proud of my sexuality. But at the moment I feel that I also have to agree with some of the newspaper's articles about whether it's right to come out.

As in a way I've had to go under cover about my sexuality for the first time in years due to comments overheard not by prison officers, but in general around me.

Prisons are very dangerous places to be in and you get all walks of life. But where I have to agree with readers in Issue 2 is the prison service breaking the discrimination conduct for gay and lesbian prisoners i.e.: prison officers not standing up for gay prisoners as the policy has always stated that it is wrong to discriminate in any way shape or form. And in my experience, I learnt that all prisons are different when tackling these issues.

My last prison has over the last year promoted a gay group and I fully commend them for doing that, as they don't stand for any intolerance in these areas and the group we started has always stood together.

But getting back to the main issue, I have to agree with readers publications: you can feel very isolated and not all prisons are the same and yes we do need a data base set up, that provides safer custody for gay and lesbian prisoners, so when making a choice on transfers you can take that in mind.

I'm a reasonably well behaved prisoner and can't afford to get into fights (as some of these prisoners can be from all worries or worrying problems i.e.: taking drugs, drinking hooch or alcohol), as this could set some of us prisoners back years if we did take part in standing up for ourselves. Some of these prisoners don't really give a damn about their

actions or rehabilitation issues, as they have issues about themselves and don't even like themselves at times!

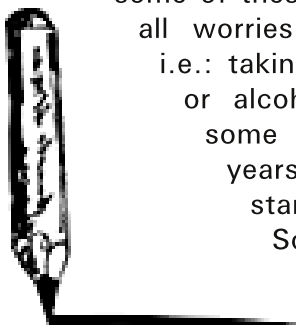
I've always said to people in the past, that you should never be scared about gay people. But sometimes it's the ones pointing the finger that really have the problems, as people tend to hide a whole array of issues and it's sometimes gay people who get targeted to cover what is their real problem.

What I don't understand is that we are now living in the 2000s and we don't have legislation to cover gay and lesbian prisoners and staff or anything written down to protect a minority group and again I would stretch this out to people in the outside community, whether they are MPs, police officers, prison officers, because whatever background, we could all be on the receiving end of these one-minded bullies in offices or work-places right around the country.

I feel very strongly about these issues and I feel that in regards to people feeling safer, in no matter what community, until something's written down to safeguard our rights to a safer future, I would weigh up the issues of coming out in any prison unless you've got the proper support, as it should be an offence to commit any form of intimidation or bullying techniques on our gay communities, inside and outside the prison.

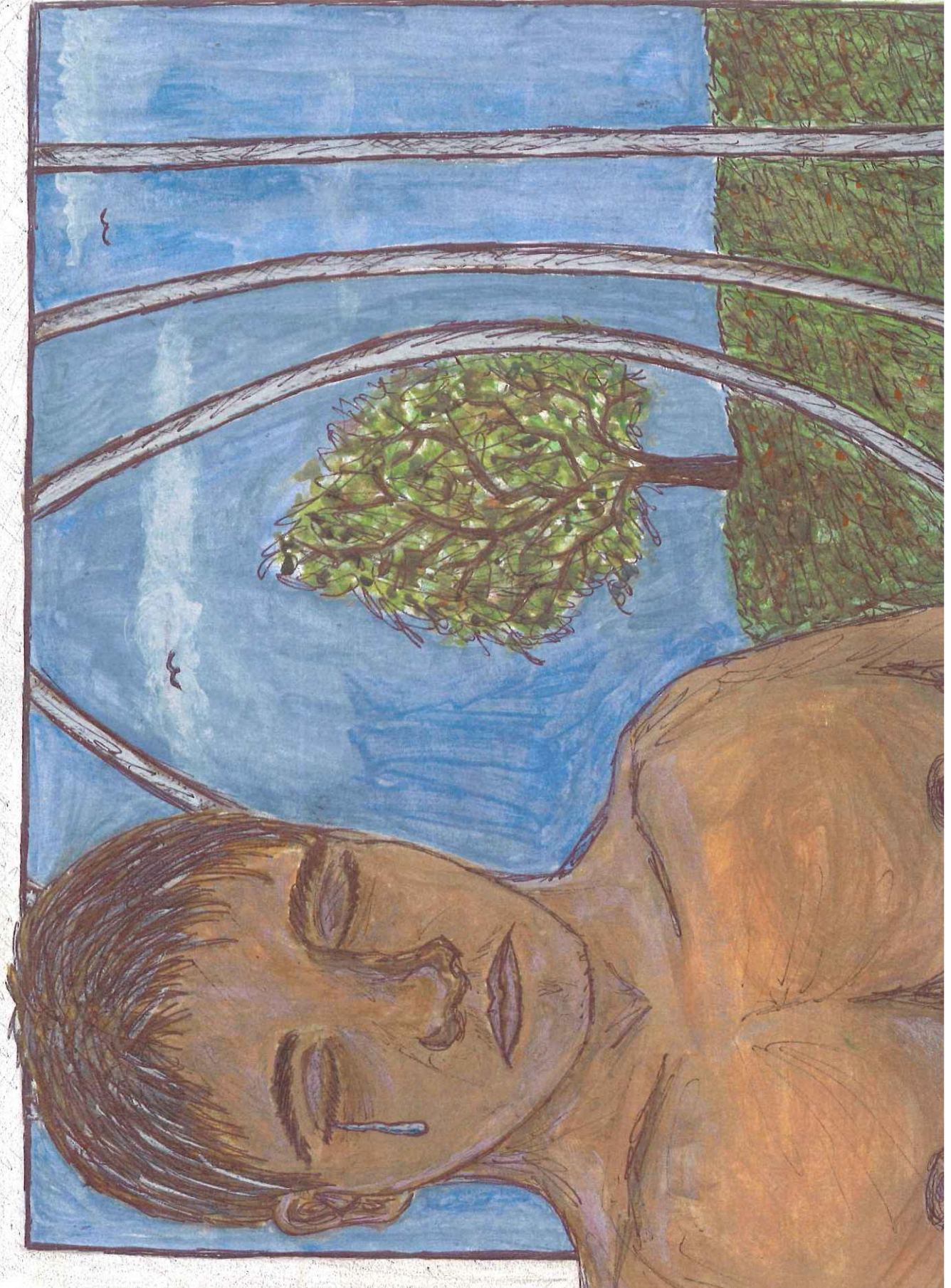
Again, through my previous article I've supported people coming out and being proud of who they are. But now I've had to retract this and say, it's up to you as an individual, but I would put a strong message to the prison service in general, you may think you can pay lip service to gay and lesbian prisoners and stuff, but remember: we are a minority group in force and believe me there's a lot of gays and lesbians in the whole system. And I feel that now is the time for your management to sit down and address these issues, otherwise your management should and could be made responsible for not adhering to policy or the rights of gay and lesbian people. As I feel that education can make people wiser and not to keep suppressing things.

Thank you. Bye for now.  
Love Jason





wool  
ere





Hello, Bent Bars

I'm SO SO SO Sorry for leaving it so long and not writing.

The reason is I lost my uncle on Christmas day he died at 3:25 PM. I have only just started writing again I've wrote to my pen pal letting him know why I hadn't wrote to him. I hope he understands why I didn't write. He will I hope.

I hope 2011 brings you all every happiness it can.

I get released this year. I can't wait only 17 1/2 weeks or something like that. I'm starting to get really excited but the time seems to be starting to go really, really, really, slow. I knew it would start to feel like that as soon as January got here.

I'll be so happy to get out coz not only have I lost my uncle I also lost both my grandparents while been locked up and my auntie. My grandparents died in 2009, my auntie on 2nd December 2010 and my uncle on 25th December so only 3 weeks different. My grand-dad died 19th February 2009 and nana died 10th June 2009 plus I've also been bullied very very badly in between to the point where twice I've tried to hang myself and once I actually died for 6 minutes and they had to work on me to bring me back and all this was because I've been bullied while been in jail for being gay.

Other lads like to be seen as big people and if you are gay you seem to be really really weak so they pick up on that and that's where the bullying starts.

You asked me if I had anything that you could put in the newsletter or anything you could use to show people how things are in prison. Well, if you

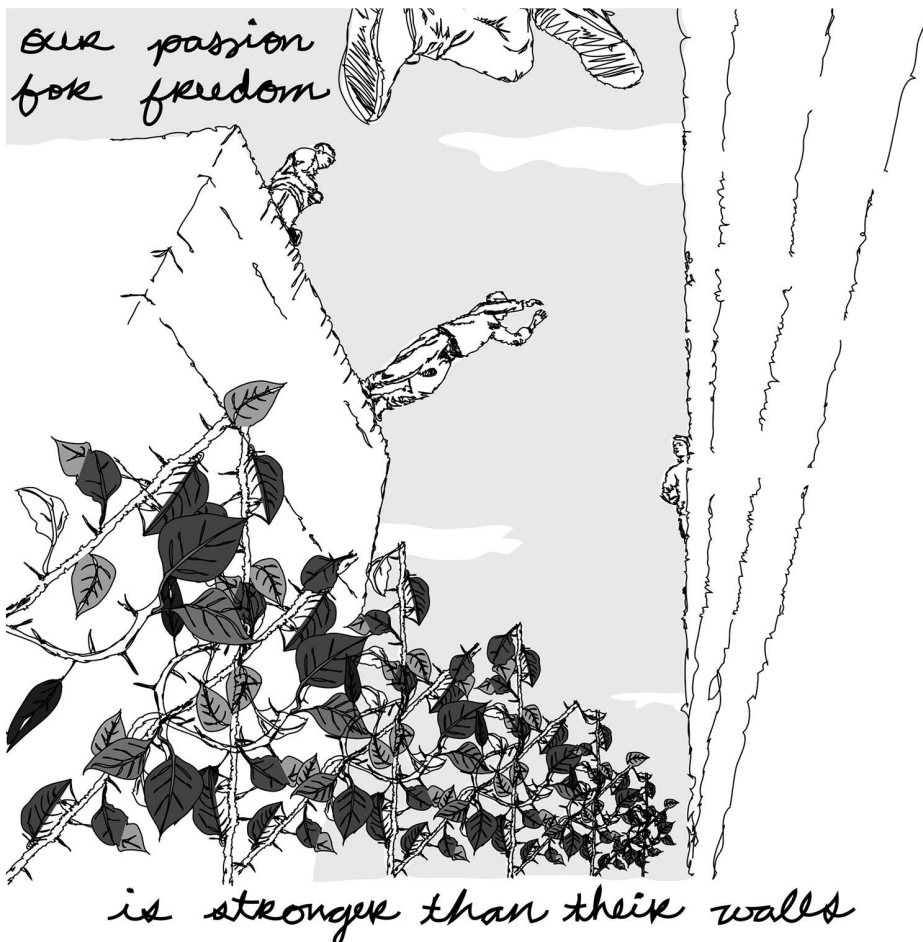
want everything I've said you can use if you want. If you can put it into a story you're more than welcome to use it as I think it would help people to understand that people still go through the same as people on the out. Just because you're locked up things don't stop. Not at all but when something does happen it seems to feel a lot worse because you can't get to help your friends and family and that really hurts and things seem million times worse as I know with twice trying to take my own life.

I don't tell people so they feel sorry for me. I tell them hoping what I've been through can teach others that even when things go wrong at that moment you feel there is no way out but after a short time you realise that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

It has taken me 3 years to learn that so it doesn't come to you straight away but I'm just so happy that I'm still here so I can hopefully help others with what I've been through all my life and even though I've been in prison I can still get out and make the most of my life coz even though I do hairdressing I really want to help other people in bad situations and show them that life doesn't always have to be bad.

Well everyone at Bent Bars I'm going out for now so hope to hear from you all again real, real soon.

Love to you all  
Hugs and Kisses  
Lots of love  
From Dwayne





# Upon Reflection

**Over** the many long years I have been in prison, I have had many trials and tribulations to contend with but none as hard as the one that still rages on inside of myself to this day.

Yes I accept who I am and my sexuality but there are days when I look in the mirror and ask, why me? Why am I gay?

Since coming out to my friends and family outside of prison at 17, I've found it easier to cope with my sexuality. I had the best support. My Mum knew before I told her but she allowed me the time to find myself truly and come out in my own time. I thought that would be the hardest part. Wrong!

The hardest part was becoming comfortable within myself in such a discriminating place. I was terrified to truly be myself, which in turn caused havoc with my physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. Having to keep so much of myself hidden when I wanted to scream it

## Very nervous my first time in prison From Steven

When I first went to prison in the 90's I found it very hard.

Knowing I was gay back then I got quite a lot of things said about me but I found the people who was saying things like faggott queer rent boy was the people who would be in groups. But because the prison I was in at the time was Norwich it was a holding prison only. As time went on I become liked by some inmates and one day I

all out on a daily basis almost killed me.

I was a prolific self-harmer from the age of 14 when I realised I was gay and all the other stuff going on for me all built up inside me. I also developed an eating disorder, bulimia, because I hated everything inside and around me and just wanted to disappear, and I tried to take my own life on several occasions.

It has taken me 8 years of battling with myself and through my self-harm to get to a point where I can deal with my sexuality and prison life in a better way. Since overcoming my demons I've found a partner who I love and loves me, I'm happier and am no longer ashamed of who I am.

My message to anyone reading this, who's suffering in silence, ask someone to help you, don't go down the routes I have cause it's not worth all the pain you're causing yourself or your friends and family in the long run and it's your life, no-one else's, so take control.

Yours,  
**Jermaine**



Artwork by Bec Young

was put in a two-man cell and the person who was calling the names was my cell mate. I got put in the cell only because the other people who called me names was shipped out. This just left one person. He got to know me and after some time he said to me I have something to tell you: 'I am gay as well. I did what I did to you because I did not want my friends to

know I was gay'. I forgave him and I never got the name calling again. We've become good friends. In those days there was no TV in cell. Just radio from the chapel. The point is when people take the micky out of you they have things to hide behind themselves. I got liked very much once I told every one I was gay and it made me feel happy to be able to walk around and go to speak to the people who I usually mix with. ♦



Atwork by Yoly Petra Stoeve

Dear Bent Bars,  
I'd like to start by saying thank you for putting my poem and letter in the last newsletter and I hope it will help others. There is something I would like to bring to yours and your readers attention, **I have finally made the decision to go for gender reassignment, with the support of my family and friends I may add.** My first appointment with the gender clinic is in January and as I'm at the beginning of the program I have to live as female for a year (real life experience). I approached the mental health nurse in the prison who backed me wholly on my decision and also sent E-mails to the headquarters of the S.P.S (Scottish Prison Service) to see where they stood on allowing me to do this whilst still in prison. I feel that I must add that I am in an open prison, as this may have something to do with their decision. I have since met with governors and have another couple of meetings to go but **they have permitted my request under the Diversity and Equality Act 2010.**

They have been extremely understanding and supportive and treated me with respect; this is a first for the open estate and maybe even S.P.S as although they have had transgender people in their establishment before, they have usually been at an advanced point treatment whereas I'm at the very beginning. On a further note the prisoners within this prison have been, on the whole, supportive and understanding, I'd like that to be noted as all too often it's the negative reactions that are expressed when discussing things like coming out and acceptance.

There have been one or two imbeciles but that's the same in any walk of life but generally the prisoner population within the open estate have been great. If this was to change once they actually see and meet me in my female form then I will inform you of this

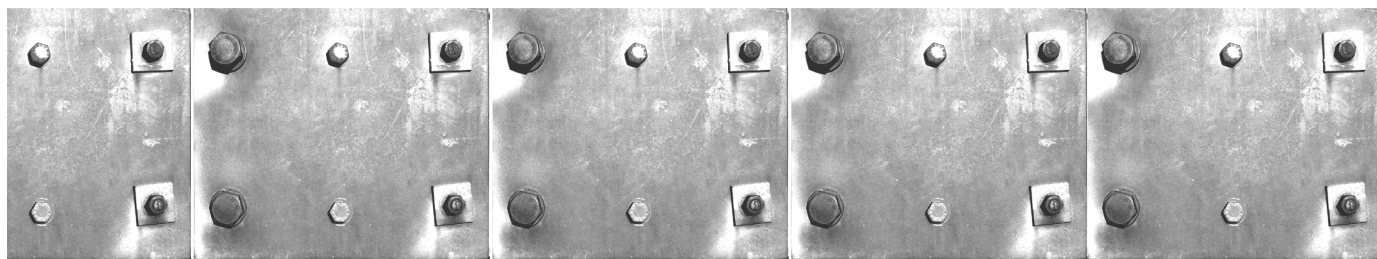
as well. At the time of writing this letter the whole transition has not yet taken place but I will write a follow up letter to update you on how the reaction has been. **I am the Diversity and Equality rep but as far as LGBTQ support group, here or in any Scottish prison, I have never heard of a single one.** I offer my services and support to anyone within the Scottish prison system and upon release will continue to do so. How would I do this and can you help? **I will keep you informed on events considering my status in the prison system for your own records in case anyone wants to do the same as myself or even just for reference for any other cases.** I'd appreciate it if you ever publish anything I submit for the news letters in the future, for my name to be given as 'Cassie' as this is the name I am now known by within the prison estate by both officers and cons. I wish to remain on the pen pal service after my release as I'd like to help others within any of the prison establishments.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Bent Bars project for all their hard work. You have come up with much needed newsletters, advice, pen pal network and support. Prisoners have been going through our situations alone for far too long and now that's not necessary because of the work you are doing. If it wasn't for yourselves I wouldn't be at the point where I am right now and certainly not within this timeline.

Once again I give you permission to print any part of this letter that you feel appropriate in the next newsletter.

Yours Gratefully  
With Hugs  
Cassie





## **Big Frank, on the gay victims of the Holocaust.**

In 1939 Hitler invaded Poland leading Britain to declare war on Germany. But did you know that in 1941 Hitler issued an order giving the death sentence to all homosexuals?

As you may be aware January 27th is international Holocaust Memorial day. Like many others I learnt about the Holocaust while I was at the school. It is estimated that up to six million Jews were killed between 1933 and 1945. The atrocities committed by the Nazi regime are well known to most. However, what I never realised was how gay people suffered under the same regime.

It is estimated that 15000 gay men died in concentration camps and 100,000 were arrested under the Nazi regime.

Subjected to gruesome medical experiments as well as castration, gay men suffered horrifically under the Nazis. Gay women were subjected to “corrective rape” in an attempt to “cure” them. What I found truly unbelievable was that after the war and the liberation of the concentration camps this suffering did not end. The Allies, Austria and the new German states refused to recognise homosexual prisoners as victims of the Nazis meaning that many continued to serve their prison sentences.

To have suffered the atrocities of the Nazis would have been unbearable for most, but to then have your liberators basically say that you deserved it is an

absolute disgrace

Paragraph 175 (the Criminal Code making illegal to be gay) remained in effect in West Germany until 1969. In East Germany it remained in effect until 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell.

Fortunately much has changed since then and today Germany is recognised as a Mecca for homosexuals. Gay couples can walk arm in arm kissing in the street without fear of prejudice or imprisonment. In December 2004 the Schwules Museum (Gay Museum) opened a permanent exhibition of gay history in Germany.

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**I never realised how gay people suffered under the Nazis and I think that as a community, it is vital that we know about our past.**

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On May 27th 2008 the “Memorial to the Homosexuals persecuted under National Socialist Regime” was presented to the public.

I never realised how gay people suffered under the Nazis and I think that as a community, it is vital that we know about our past.

I would like to thank the LGF whose “untold stories” exhibition drew my attention to this subject and who provided me with all the information I needed. I hope I have been able to bring this to the attention of others and that you will take a moment to remember all the victims of the Holocaust.





# Letter from David D.

I recently received your letter, thank you for that.

To answer some of your questions. Yes I'm out of jail in August. I've been so looking forward to getting a penpal and still am, and yes will definitely still look to be an outside penpal too, and do what I can to help guys still stuck in prison. I mean as someone myself in prison for the first time. Then finding out that your service is available. Well it made me happy knowing I'd have someone to write to. It took me 2 days to put together my "ad". I look forward to getting your letters every night hoping I get one from a penpal but none ever comes. I put my ad in months ago. Telling other guys here about your service, they say to me 'let me no when you get a letter'. 'Lets us have a look' they say. 'We will put an ad in for a penpal. But now. They say 'what's the point if it takes this long'. It's just as important for guys doing one year to have contact with penpals as someone doing 10 yrs.

For me, putting my ad in has given me something to look forward to: getting a penpal. Hoping to get a letter. It keeps you sane. But hoping and waiting and sending loads of letters and getting nothing, well it just adds to the disappointment and depression.

There must be hundred' of guys in prison that would like a penpal or someone on the out who can send them new' and letter'. How can it take 4 or 5 months to get a reply. Just like having a TV in your cell it stop' guy' thinking of doing suicide. Getting letter' from a penpal I think would make us feel that we are not on our own, that someone cares. But wating month' and month' and still not getting a letter adds to the the bad falt'. I'm sorry but it really does. It's not good. Also it's very hard to read your letter' specially for us who can't read very well. Have to get staff to read for us but then our secret's out "gay" "bi" "st" and still no reply. Can't win.

Dear David,  
Thanks David for your letter. The problem you raise is a really valid one, and one that we too are concerned about. We also find it very disappointing when we discover that an outside pen pal hasn't written or followed up and someone inside has been left waiting. When we first started up it took us a while to recruit enough outside pen pals and people sometimes had to wait a few months before they could be matched. That situation is now largely resolved and number of people in prison and those outside waiting to be matched is more or less equal, so we hope to be able to match most people within about a month. But we have had problems from time to time where some people - both inside and outside prison - have expressed an eagerness to write but then once they have been matched, for whatever reason (and it's sometimes reasons beyond their control) haven't actually written. It can take a while for this to become apparent because sometimes people just delay writing and sometimes letters go astray and sometimes people are moved at short notice. When it's clear the match has failed because one or other side hasn't written or in some cases they've written just once and then haven't written again, we need to re-match. There have been one or two cases unfortunately where people have had two or more failed matches before we can successfully match them, though we do everything we can to avoid this kind of thing happening as we know how important it is for letters to get through quickly. We follow things up more closely now and as a result we hope this will happen less often than it did in the past.

Sincerely, **The Bent Bars Collective.**

# Letter from Lee

Response to Article 'Call my Name' by Dave in Newsletter 2

Hello, my name is Lee, in a prison where, I must add, is NO SUPPORT for the homosexual prisoner. When I came to this prison staff and prisoners tried to silence me and said I am dangerously gay and too open about my sexuality. This got me angry so one day I said in front of an officer so what I am gay get over it don't tell me how to act: I'm gay not a mug. The fact is I don't care what anyone thinks about me or my sexuality: I am a human being at the end of the day. So all the small-minded so-called "hard men" can shut it. Remember lads, most of those who make homophobic comments or taunts are most probably in the closet with the door firmly closed.

A quick story for you!!

Last week an officer came into my cell and took my posters down of half-naked men cos apparently it "makes him sick." He went in someone else's cell and left poster of naked women up!! ugh!! and said that's more like it. So in front of prisoners and officers I confronted this muppet and I let my tongue run away, I said "How dare you take my posters down" "What's up?" "Is it because you don't have bodys like the men in my posters? Or is it because you're not comfortable with your own sexuality?" I said to him: "Some people- hence the word people, I'm a person- are gay, get over it" and walked away. That officer was reported and now is not allowed to come near me and I stand tall and say to you all we are all people, we are no different to anyone else. Remember most of those so-called "str8 lads" dabble anyway. Lol.▀



We are aware of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans support groups at the following prisons:

- \* HMP Holloway
- \* HMP Downview
- \* HMP Preston
- \* HMP Acklington
- \* HMP Wealstun
- \* HMP Gartree
- \* HMP Wakefield
- \* HMP Dovegate
- \* HMP Grendon
- \* HMP Usk
- \* HMP Stafford

# **CALL OUT** **FOR THE NEXT NEWSLETTER:** **'SUPPORTING EACH OTHER INSIDE'**

Over the past couple of years many of you have written to us with news of the LGBTQ support groups you have set up inside prison. It is inspiring to read about all the ways that LGBTQ people are offering support to each other inside, and sad to hear when the groups have to stop for some reason. So in the last newsletter we asked people to send in details of the different support groups that were running so we could compile a directory. However this has proved to be too difficult as the support groups change so much due to transfers, changes in policy and all kinds of other issues.

We were wondering what to do about this when we received a letter from Big Frank with this suggestion:

**'I know some prisons already have support groups and I wondered if there are any readers out there who could write about their experience and opinion of these support groups. It may help or even inspire others to try and set up their own support group.'**

This is a great idea and we decided this is what we would focus on for the next newsletter.

**WE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU ON THIS SUBJECT! HERE ARE SOME IDEAS FOR THINGS TO INCLUDE:**

- If you have set up a support group for LGBTQ in your prison, how did it go?
- What were the problems and challenges in setting up the group?
- What were the successes and the things that worked really well?
- If the group is still running, what keeps it going?
- If your group had to stop, what lessons did you learn from this?
- If you have attended a support group, what was your experience?
- Did being in the group change your situation, either in the prison or for you personally?
- Where there films, TV shows, books or magazines that you found useful for your group? Are there magazines that you can receive inside that you recommend?
- If you have any images or graphics that you used to promote your group, send them in – we can use them to illustrate the newsletter.
- If you don't have a LGBTQ support group in your prison, what kind of group would you like to see started? What activities would you want it to focus on? How would you want it to be run?

**... These are just a few suggestions for you – we would love to hear all your thoughts and perspectives on this issue. Looking forward to hearing from you. All the Bent Bars crew. ...**



So you know...

The Bent Bars Collective aims to include the contributions we receive as they are submitted, without making editorial changes to content or style (beyond spelling and grammar corrections when necessary). However, due to space constraints, some articles are edited for length.

If you've submitted something and don't find your writing or artwork in this or previous issues, we'll aim to include it in the next one. Don't be shy to drop us a line to make sure we have received it!

We will not publish any material which reinforces stereotypes or expresses oppressive attitudes towards others.

The articles in this newsletter are written by people in prison and it is read by people inside and outside of prison. It is of free distribution so if you'd like a copy, just ask.

We welcome thoughts, comments and replies to questions raised in these pages from you all.

*The Bent Bars Project is a letter-writing program that connects lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, gender-variant, intersex, and queer communities across prison walls. If you would like more information or would like to request a penpal, please drop us a line.*

How to contact us:

**Bent Bars Project**  
**PO Box 66754**  
**London, WC1A 9BF**

bent.bars.project@gmail.com  
www.bentbarsproject.org

Artwork by Molly Fair



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