

# BENT BARS PROJECT

## Newsletter 6 Spring 2015



When we decided that the theme of this newsletter should be 'role models' we didn't really have any idea of what kind of contributions this might inspire. Whether the role models would be people that you have met or read about from real life, family members, friends or strangers, or possibly fictional characters, whether they would be role models to inspire people in their past, present or future — anything was possible. And naturally, as has always been the case when we have asked people to contribute to Bent Bars community publications, the results have encompassed all of these and more.

Without wanting to pick out individual contributions we would just like to thank everyone who has contributed to this, the 6<sup>th</sup> Newsletter, and for the creativity and in many cases the emotion that has been invested in these pieces. It means so much for us here at Bent Bars Towers to receive and read everything you send, and we hope it means as much to everyone that we send a copy to. We also hope of course that you are able to pass these around and share your collective experiences with anyone who you think might be interested, and who might in the future be interested in joining the project.

It is our intention of course, to support LGBTQI prisoners and help you share your experiences, especially if you are in a situation where you may not have that opportunity with people around you. And also to share more widely across institutions to let people know there are many other people like you, like us, and like our many supporters, around the country bound together in an organisation offering mutual support. In the spirit of celebrating LGBTQI role models, the Bent Bars Collective has also included some images of people who inspire us and motivate our work in the project.

For our next issue the theme we have picked is 'Imagining the future: What would you put in a time capsule?' (see page 18 for more details). We are only a small voluntary organisation, and putting these together takes time so Newsletter 7 won't be published for quite a few months. But we hope that as many of you as possible can contribute stories, poems, pictures or anything creative for us to include and share next time as well. We would also love to hear what you think about this edition of the newsletter.

Thanks to everyone who has contributed and we hope you all enjoy this edition! Please let us know.

# ROLE MODELS

Someone who helped me face the world honestly and someone I really admire and respect so much I'm finding it hard to put into words... ♥ the person I'm talking about is a lovely gorgeous ♥ lad I got to know here at this prison called Matt\* who I fell for big time. I can't help but think of him: he's on my mind 24-7 and we used to be with each other all the time. Matt helped me in more ways than he'll ever know. We both worked together and we sat off together. ♥ When Matt went to court and got out I was so happy, but also so sad because I had lost my friend but they say in life, some birds' feathers are just too bright and you can't keep them caged you just have to set them free. I found this to be the case with my friend

Matt. And Matt was Matt: he never cared who or what people thought. He was camp, he was girly and he was Matt and I truly loved that about him.

I then sat down and really thought about things, thought about me, thought about who am I really, who is the true me. Now I've always hidden my feelings, hidden the true me, even me mum never truly knew, she has asked before though, and I always lied and I've hated myself for doing that for years as I don't like lying. Through Matt I have found the strength to be open and honest firstly with myself, secondly with me mum and also with everyone else, and I now feel great. I feel like the true me and I am open and honest now: I am gay and I like lads and everything about them.

That does not mean I want to jump into bed with every lad I see though...

I knew from a young age (around 13 or 14 years old) that I was different to my two brothers. They were always checking girls out; I was never really interested in girls I always had them around me and they were always trying to get into me, but I always found myself checking a nice fit lad out and still do to this very day. I've never had a relationship with a girl; I've only ever had relationships with lads and I've always been happy. Just never ever really had the strength to tell me mum. It's partly to do with me dad who I really dislike as he hates people like me; well here's one for him: he has a son who is gay so put that in your pipe dad.

I'll never hide who I am anymore never ever: I should be proud of who I am and I am proud of who I am; I love being me the true me; I'm happy and I'm gay; it's who I am. In time when I'm released I just want to chill, meet a nice lad and settle, have a life and make me mum happy and proud ♥ ♥ that her son is living his life and he's happy, and who knows in time... I'll leave the rest to you. Be who you are, be the true you and always be proud of who you are. I've learned this from my friend Matt, this is me, and I send all my love to everyone. x

Jamie xxx





### **Role Models**

I had just left Holloway prison in January 2011. I'm a recovering alcoholic as well as being transgender; I could be more independent and I changed my name by deed poll. I had a sponsor and she helped me go through the 12 steps of AA.

She has been a very good friend, helped me with my benefits and came to a tribunal to get benefits sorted out. She bought things for my flat and painted pictures to hang up on my walls. She was my appropriate adult at the police station early this year and appeared in court to give a character reference. She sent me in clothes when in prison.

We had some good times - like I went with her family to choose a puppy and I watched him grow up. We went out for meals too. I really do respect her: she's honest, reliable and has a heart of gold.

By Chris

## Can a young teen be a role model?

By S.H.

After the shock of my crime, I realised my sexuality. Due to my world in the forces, I had denied who I was and lived a lie to me and everyone in my life, for all my life.

Enough was enough. I eventually admitted who I am to myself, but how could I explain this to my beautiful daughter? At 15, she was already coping with the fact I would be going to prison. She stood by me, supported me, and still loved me. When I came out to her, I looked into her eyes for her disappointment, checked her smile waiting for a look of shock, terror, disapproval. How much more could I drop onto her shoulders O.M.G.? The smile remained, no shock or horror, she simply said: "If you're happy, that's what matters". She also told me she has lots of

gay and lesbian and also bi-sexual friends, she also goes to a local GBTL youth club to support these friends, I am and always would be her daddy.

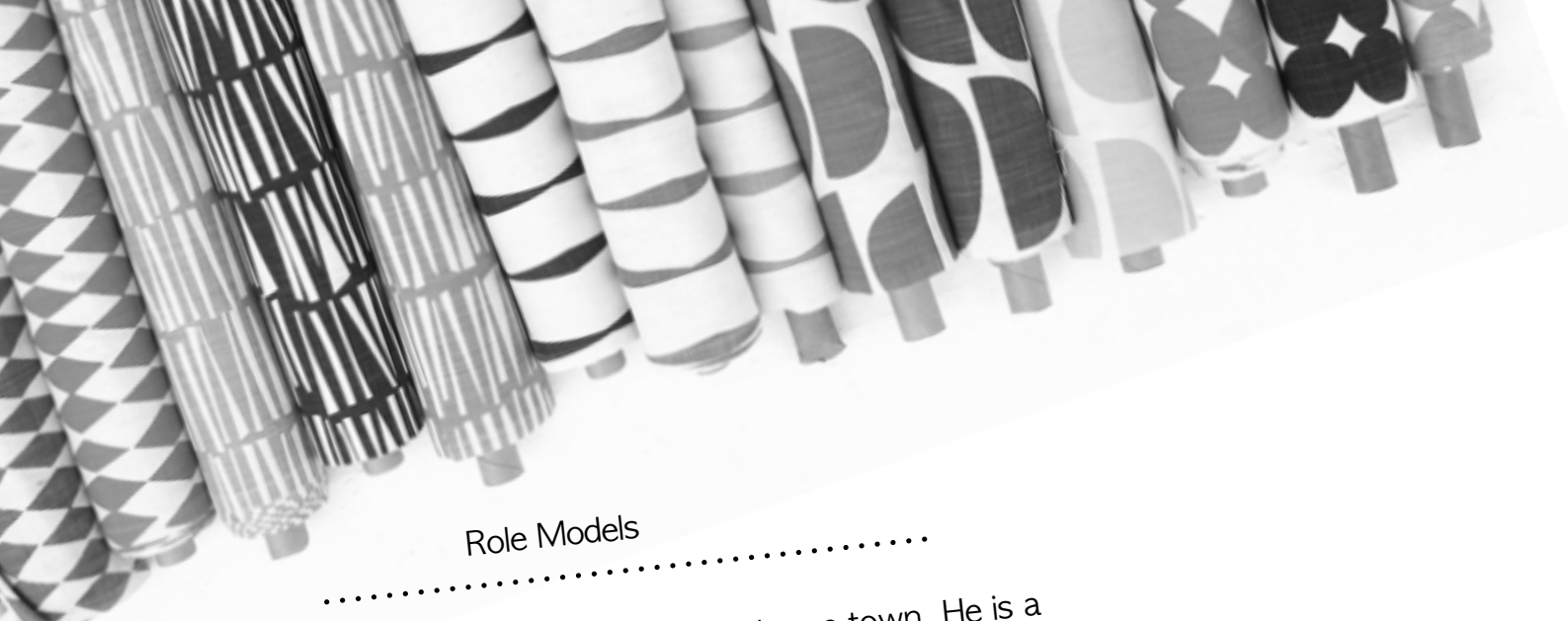


People Who Inspire Us: Dean Spade founded the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, an advocacy organisation in New York City which works to guarantee that all people are free to self-determine gender identity and expression, regardless of income or race, and without facing harassment, discrimination or violence.

How could such a young person, my daughter, be so open, non-judgemental but most of all so supportive despite me constantly letting her down so much? I love my daughter so much she is such an inspiration. I hope one day I can make her as proud of me as I am of her.

So, 'can a young teen be a role model'? Absolutely! Age means nothing, it's

how you live your life and support, help and guide others that make you a role model. To my daughter, I love you, miss you and am so, so proud of you.



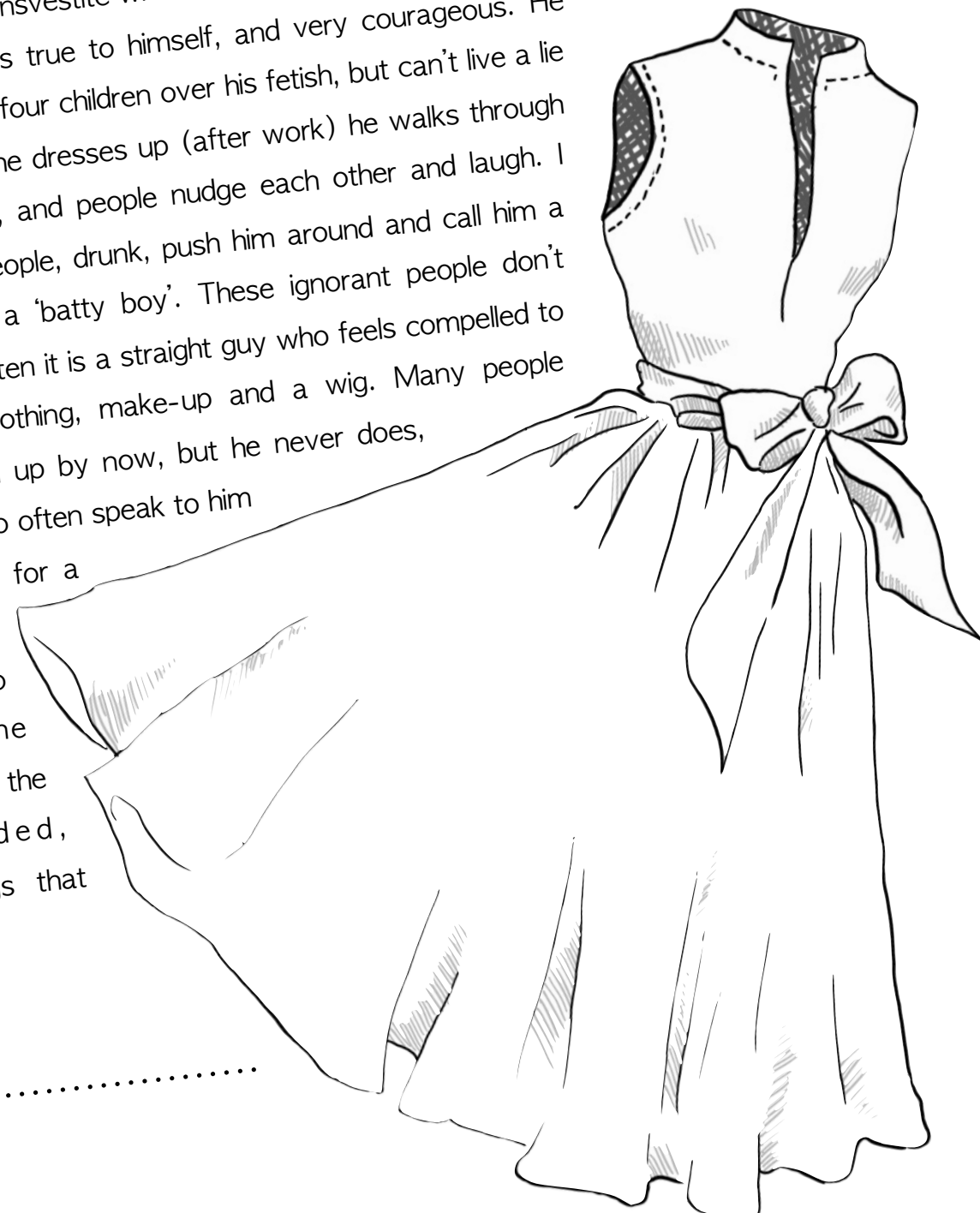
## Role Models

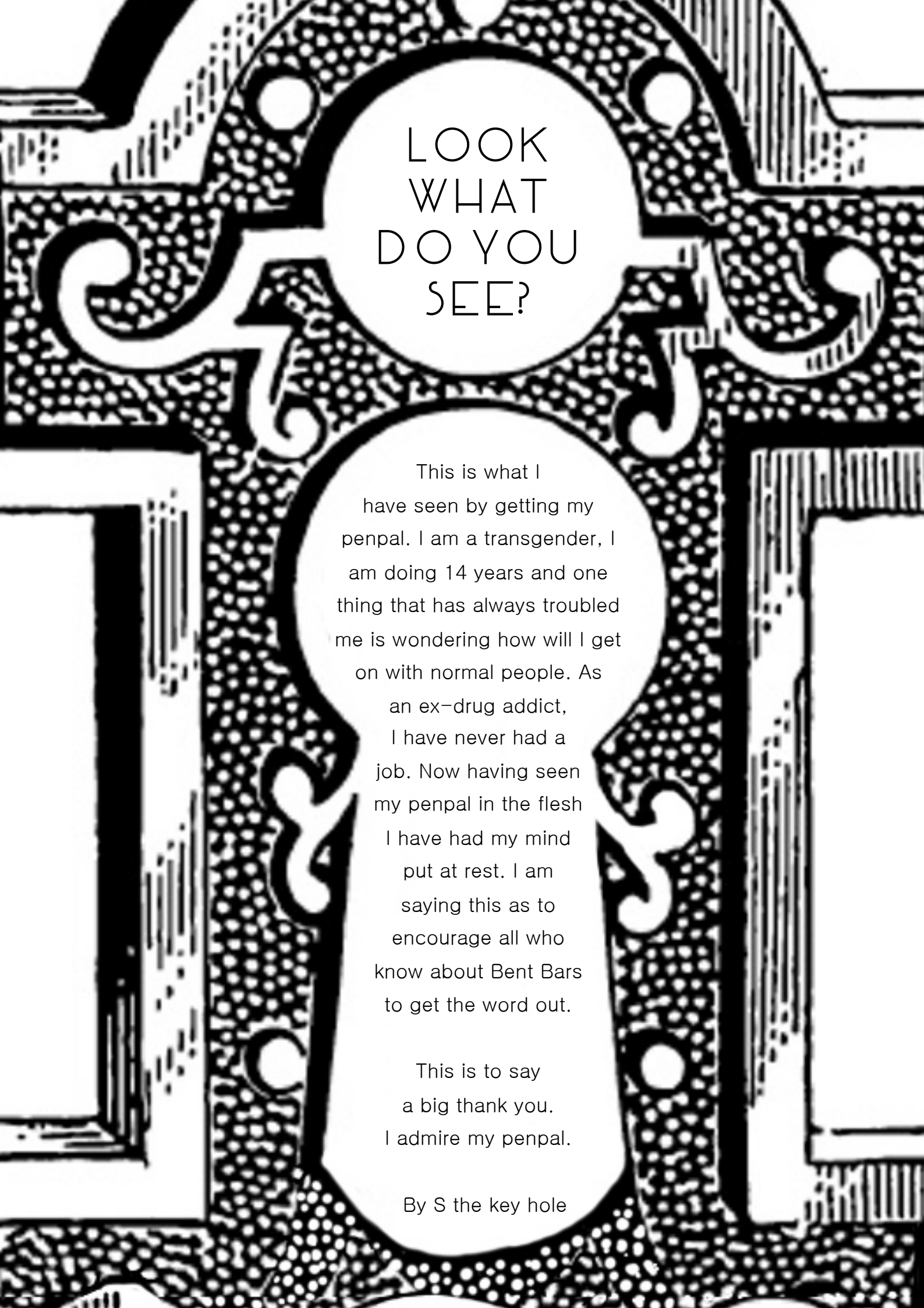
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My role model is a transvestite who lives in my home town. He is a stocky builder, who is true to himself, and very courageous. He has lost his wife and four children over his fetish, but can't live a lie just to fit in. When he dresses up (after work) he walks through the centre of town, and people nudge each other and laugh. I have often seen people, drunk, push him around and call him a freak, faggot and a 'batty boy'. These ignorant people don't understand that often it is a straight guy who feels compelled to wear women's clothing, make-up and a wig. Many people would have given up by now, but he never does, and I feel proud to often speak to him in the street, go for a coffee, or have a pint or two with him. The true freaks are the small-minded, insecure thugs that pick on him!

Lloyd

.....





# LOOK WHAT DO YOU SEE?

This is what I  
have seen by getting my  
penpal. I am a transgender, I  
am doing 14 years and one  
thing that has always troubled  
me is wondering how will I get  
on with normal people. As  
an ex-drug addict,  
I have never had a  
job. Now having seen  
my penpal in the flesh  
I have had my mind  
put at rest. I am  
saying this as to  
encourage all who  
know about Bent Bars  
to get the word out.

This is to say  
a big thank you.  
I admire my penpal.

By S the key hole

## **From Keith:**

As I have been in prison for over 3 years now, I have seen a lot of prisons - some good and a lot bad.

I have met some lovely men and some that have so much hate for all gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual people and so on. I still give them the time of day: I hate what they stand for and the way they think, but maybe if I do my best to get to know them, and in turn they get to know me, they may see that just because I sleep with men does not make me a lesser man.

Some of you may remember I wrote in before in Newsletter 5 Summer 2014. I was K. In that letter I said I hope I do not have a lover in prison. Well thank god, I did - I met a lovely man, by the name of John\*. He was only 21, so did not think we would get on as I was 50, but he was so open about being gay in prison, I thought maybe he could help me be more out, so best get to know him. It got to a time that we were never apart, all the time we were out of the cells. A lot of the time he was in my cell or I was in his. Six months in to me knowing him we were lovers and you would have to have had a crowbar to get us apart.

Sadly he left me to go home. It felt like my life was over: for the next week I stayed in my cell all I did was sit there and cry. I did not eat, I could not sleep, I only went to work as I had to. Whenever I did go for

food I would see something that reminded me of him, so I would go back to my cell. Two weeks into being on this road I was not getting any better. I even had a think about self-harm, but I don't do pain, so just sat there till they took me to healthcare.

Then one morning the door opened and an officer said, "you are off today to a new prison", and I thought my life could not go down hill any more. Then I was sitting on the bus looking out the window watching the world go by when I saw John. Well I hope I did, as it was someone that looked like him, and you guessed it, the tears were back.

My first day in a new prison I wished I had John with me. I thought: "well he is not so what would he do? I know!" ... so I want to see the L.G.B.T. rep on association. I thought that way the wing will know in minutes I am gay, and it did the job as over the next hours I had 3-4 men come up to me to talk about where I was from and to let me know this prison is ok to be gay in. Thank you John! I said to myself, there were 7 of us that came from the old prison, 6 of them I knew and the 7th was John. He was in my head, so without even knowing it he was a role model for me.

I know he was only 21 but he had so much life experience I would have to write a book. So even though I did not know it all, he knew was rubbing off on me.



Some weeks into this new prison, I got to know Steven\*, who was in his late 20s. Over time I got to know him well - we talked every day: just day to day stuff, what we do on the out for work, what we did to end up in prison. He is not gay, but I would say he is one of my best friends. I knew his job, well, he was Old Bill so a lot of the men did not want to know him.

Not me: I go on what I know of you in prison not what you were out there, so in his time he has seen a lot of good and a lot of bad. To me he is a role model who inspires me to keep going with the way I am running my life - breaking down walls, giving people my time when we talk. If I think he is being a nob I tell him. He will always stand up for what he believes in. We move on

topics, but no matter what it is about we keep the chat going, even when I am being a donut or I am wrong. All the way he is there for me. I can always just be me around him - sometimes he will just listen to me going on, but he still does not put me down.

I wish I knew him in my teens. One thing he said to me I will always remember, he said: "put more in than you take out", and I said, "what is all that about?" He said, "you will have to work that out for yourself". The

next day he was moved to a new prison so I have lost one more good mate.

I do know that in time I will grow and give more back, back into what I still don't know. All I know is that I have two men in my life and in my mind they always will be role models.



**People Who Inspire Us:** Aderonke Apata is a lesbian Nigerian LGBT activist whose asylum request was denied by the UK High Court.

If we all look about time to time we will see role models. A lot of the time we don't even know it, your mum, dad, best friend, the T.V. At work and at play give yourself some time to stop and look around. You may not know what it is till you look for it - people who do their best to make us the best. For me it will always be my dad, and John and Steven - and so many more I cannot say - I don't have the time or the paper. Nowadays I

don't cry about things or people I have lost. I smile and think what they gave me so in turn I pass that on. Some of you may say a man of now 52 should know more. That is true, but if you do not look you do not see.

I would love to go back in time but I cannot so thank you to all the men in my life. Thank you BB you all are role models to me.

Thank you,  
Keith H.

## My Hero / Role Model

One of my heroes or someone I admire and think of as a role model is not a sport's star or a big T.V. celebrity or even famous from the past or today. Of course there are people who have fame who I respect, rate highly and look up to. But the person I want to tell you about is a friend and mate I met in prison. Yes, he is a prisoner like me. His spirit and kindness is great. The generosity of his compassion and his want to help, coupled with the ability to not let others take advantage of him, is a quality that can spur on all that see it.

I first met him on the first day of a course. He was not on the course but there in the role as a peer mentor. I found him so inspiring. He helped me and gave me extra motivation and inspiration to get me on my way to do the course.

Since then I have met him as a peer mentor and then he became a mate and friend. I have seen him not only give support but be able to receive it humbly, which has been a good skill to see.

He has the ability to ask the right questions so you can see the way without being told. He played a part in bringing me and my dad back together by using gentle persuasion (a kick up the bum).

He does not judge or play at being jury. He has shown me that my sexuality is ok and I can be who I am. I can be honest and out to those I was trying to hide it from most, my family and friends. (If he can mince around so accepted by people, then why can't I?)

This person has motivated me into getting fit, and for the first time in my life, I've got enough courage to go to the gym and do sport in front of others.



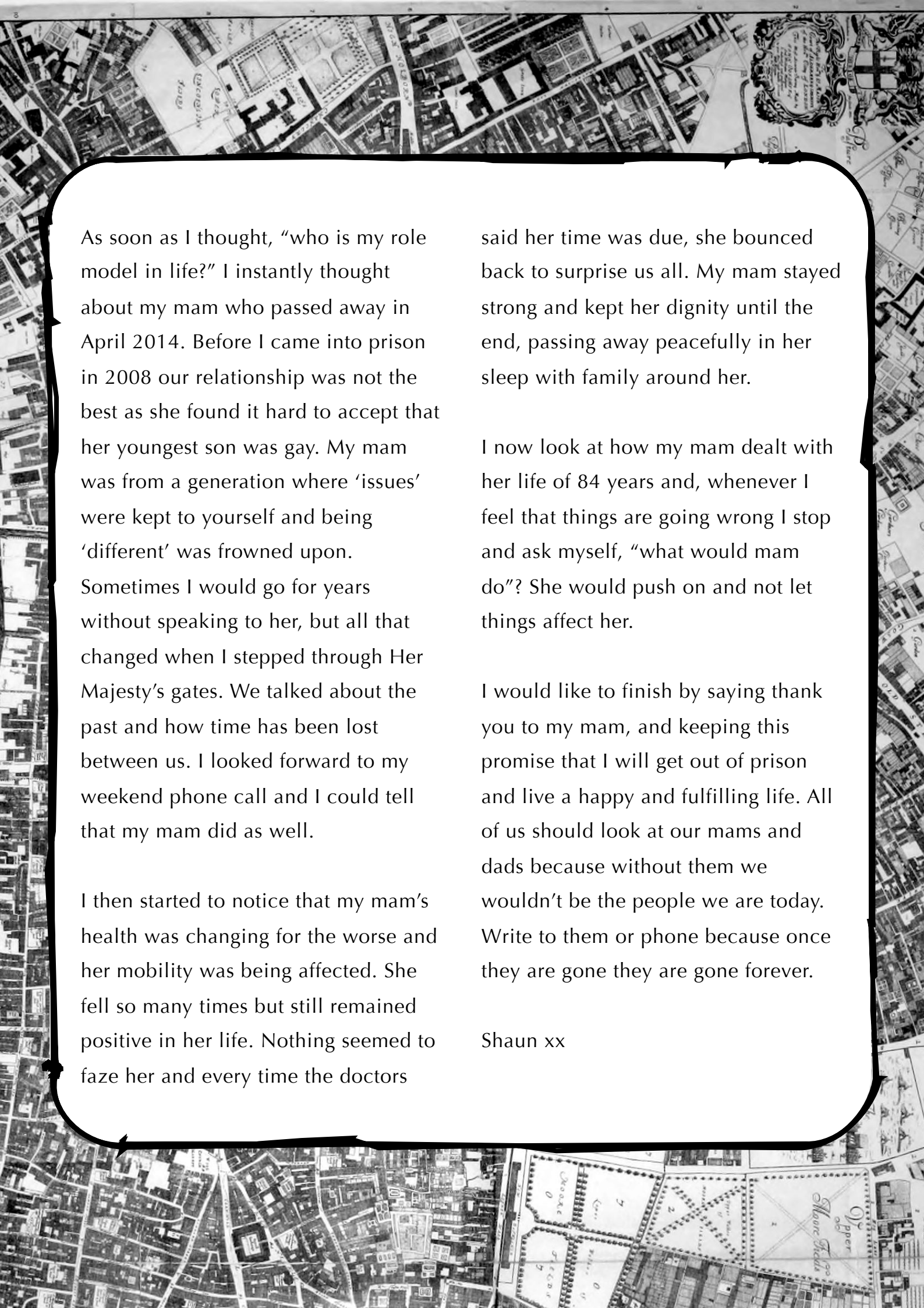
**People Who Inspire Us:** Angela Davis is a political activist, scholar, and author. She is a fierce critic of the 'prison-industrial complex,' and was the centre of international rallies to free political prisoners.

He stuck with me all the time, even when I was finding it challenging. When I am released I will probably not be allowed to have him as a friend. However his presence will always be with me in the form of the things I have learnt and the example he has shown to all those lucky enough to be around him.

I feel he has helped guide me to the tools for a successful life, a future I could not see that long ago. I hope I have played a positive part for him in some small way.

Thank you D-J you are a real hero / role model but most of all I will always have you as a friend in my heart.

Pete



As soon as I thought, "who is my role model in life?" I instantly thought about my mam who passed away in April 2014. Before I came into prison in 2008 our relationship was not the best as she found it hard to accept that her youngest son was gay. My mam was from a generation where 'issues' were kept to yourself and being 'different' was frowned upon. Sometimes I would go for years without speaking to her, but all that changed when I stepped through Her Majesty's gates. We talked about the past and how time has been lost between us. I looked forward to my weekend phone call and I could tell that my mam did as well.

I then started to notice that my mam's health was changing for the worse and her mobility was being affected. She fell so many times but still remained positive in her life. Nothing seemed to faze her and every time the doctors

said her time was due, she bounced back to surprise us all. My mam stayed strong and kept her dignity until the end, passing away peacefully in her sleep with family around her.

I now look at how my mam dealt with her life of 84 years and, whenever I feel that things are going wrong I stop and ask myself, "what would mam do"? She would push on and not let things affect her.

I would like to finish by saying thank you to my mam, and keeping this promise that I will get out of prison and live a happy and fulfilling life. All of us should look at our mams and dads because without them we wouldn't be the people we are today. Write to them or phone because once they are gone they are gone forever.

Shaun xx



## ROLE MODELS

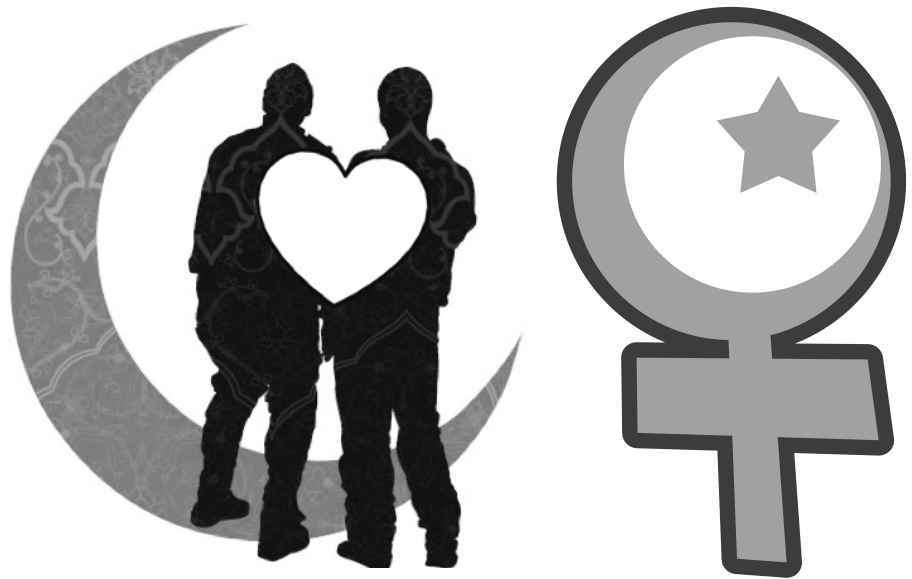
One of the people I look up to and hold in high regard is someone I met during my prison journey who I shall call Peter. When I met Peter, I was still deeply lost in Narnia land and had been trying desperately to navigate myself towards the exit for years.

I was five years into my sentence and still suffered with low self esteem, was lacking in confidence and was so fearful of others finding out my true sexuality. For a man who is a bit quiet, introspective and a bit on the effeminate side, I found prison to be a daunting place. I spent those early years of my sentence well hidden behind the mask of a lifer.

Peter, on the other hand, was assertive, quietly confident, very comfortable with the man he was and very open, in a non-flaunting way, about his sexuality. Peter was a few years older than I was and you could tell by the way he carried himself, that he had life experience.

During association, I started to take the opportunity to spend my time in Peter's company making small talk about prison and other topics. While

being acutely aware that others on the wing were questioning why a Kashmiri, Muslim, un-educated commoner would be spending his association time in the company of a white, middle class, gay older man, I found Peter's company more rewarding than the usual chatting about prison politics and past criminal activities with my streetwise associates.



Our small chats, over time, had progressed to deeper conversations of a real substance and our friendship had flourished. I came to view Peter as a genuine, honest man who had overcome many challenges in his life. I had deep trust with Peter and opened up to him about my own sexuality, the fears I had in my heart, the prejudices of my community and the strong condemnation from religious teachings. Peter shared with me the struggles he had faced growing up in an era where society was less tolerant towards gay people. He pointed out

that today there is a lot more acceptance, support, openness, and laws that protect individuals from discrimination.

Peter only had five months left before he heard the gates shut behind him. Like many prisoners, he hardly had any family or social support: he had to do everything for himself from finding a place to live, earning money, and complying with probation. Peter was very anxious about life outside.

The reason I see Peter as a role model is the way he faced up to the challenges life had put in his way and the valuable support he gave others. Peter has been in the community now for six years, has adhered to his responsibilities and improved his future prospects through higher education. It has been a tough ride for him but with patience and determination, he has worked hard to make his life meaningful.

On a personal note, during the five months that Peter was on the wing he helped me to explore, question and come to terms with the different conflicts I had going on. Thanks to Peter, I became more open about my sexuality and I am a lot happier within myself.

Peter and I are still in touch today and he continues to listen, guide, support, and encourage me to see beyond the doom and gloom of detention towards a brighter future.

In my opinion, Peter does what a role model should: inspires me by setting an example.

Abz



**People Who Inspire Us:** Kate Bornstein is a gender non-conforming performance artist, playwright, theorist, and author.

## Being a Queer Prisoner...

Being a queer prisoner can be a lonely place at times. Especially if you don't fit in with the accepted norms of prison beauty. One of the things I like about being queer is that it applies to my gender and my sexuality. I've never really paid much attention to "butch" and "femme" categories. I've just been me. But prison has rigid codes of behaviour and appearance. Girls say I should play up my macho side and I shouldn't grow my hair. But whilst I often wear my prison

"Girls say I should play up my macho side

and I shouldn't grow my hair.

But whilst I often wear my prison issue tracksuit,

sometimes I like my lacy dress"

issue tracksuit, sometimes I like my lacy dress. You can keep all the gendered courses though – nail art, hair and beauty, family life and cookery don't interest me. (Sadly they don't offer welding in women's prisons unlike men's – that would be awesome!)

My physical appearance (5ft11, size 10 ½ feet) plus the fact that I was out on the

out (and therefore "experienced") means that by the norms of prison life I should be butch and predatory. But instead I am shy, and sometimes (albeit awkwardly) femme. If I adhered to people's advice I'd probably get a lot of girls, but that's not me.

When I say I'm queer, mostly people are shocked and appalled. Coming to jail has made me realise how much I love my queer bubble and how important it is to reclaim that word, as I hate being called "bi".

Experiences of trying to engage with people around queer issues inside have made me see what a sham the concept of "equalities" is in prison. Prisoners and staff alike have all bristled and said that I was being offensive when I used that word. One person almost refused to write it down when they asked me to define my sexuality for a prison survey.

My attempts to promote Bent Bars within prison have resulted in me being called a man (I called people out on this and explained that queer and trans were different things - and that both were fine!) Also I have been called discriminatory (this is what the equalities officer said –

the word "Bent" was offensive and not inclusive to him as a straight, married man).

In my old prison, my attempts to argue were unsuccessful. They said if they allowed letter writing for LGBT people (I am deliberately omitting the QI as they refused to accept it) then they'd have to allow it for all equalities groups, and where would it end?!

There is so much drama and gossip in prison about whether you are "jail gay" or not. The aggression that arises from the hurried (often non-consensual) groping is extreme. I love being queer because it gives me confidence to have periods where I feel comfortable not engaging with sex at all (contrary to people's stereotypes of being some sex pest who comes out to everyone)! The high speed shag and inevitable post match analysis (often shouted through windows across blocks after bang up) leaves me cold.

I think part of the reason there is so much drama and nosiness around sex/sexuality in prisons is that people don't question

"I love being queer because it gives me confidence

to have periods where I feel comfortable

not engaging with sex at all"

the broader social picture. Girls inside often feel unconfident, awkward, not in control and lonely. They do not have positive relationships and there is an ever-pervasive sense of competition.

As a queer, I believe that we are all on a fluctuating spectrum of sexuality. I don't care how someone identified before they were inside. What I do care about is respect, and healthy relationships.

LOVE + RAGE,

BEM x

I would just like to say about the Newsletter 3 – Autumn 2011 - there is one poem in there written by Barrie and it calls what I feel. I read it ten times a day when I feel upset or down. I love it. It puts this feeling inside me and makes me happy. I love all the stories and poems in the newsletter and am looking forward to the next issue. This was just a little letter to let you know I am ok. Thank you for my penpal.

Love and air kisses, Terry

Dear Bent Bars

Thank you for all your advice and information. My life outside was bisexual and proud but when I came to prison my true identity that was taken away by the robes of prison kit.

It has taken me 2 years to be me. I am now trying to change things here in prison. People have tried to start a GBT group but due to numbers and people moving on, the group went silent again. I would love to thank A. and M. (you both know who you are) as at last I no longer hide. You both said I had no reason to hide. I hope I may be able to change things here so if you come here there is someone who understands you and not the silent community behind these prison doors.

All the best, T.C.

☺ Change must be the best thing ever.



**Dear Bent Bars and the members,**

Hi, Jason here. Just thought I would write to give my contribution for the next Newsletter. It's good that the mag is going strong and I loved reading every contribution in Newsletter 5 Summer 2014.

I would like to say to our readers I'm here, I'm queer, I walk with my head high, but I always ignore the jeers.

Be strong, be tough. And don't give in as times can be rough. Don't try to hide, try and find space within just to be yourself and be

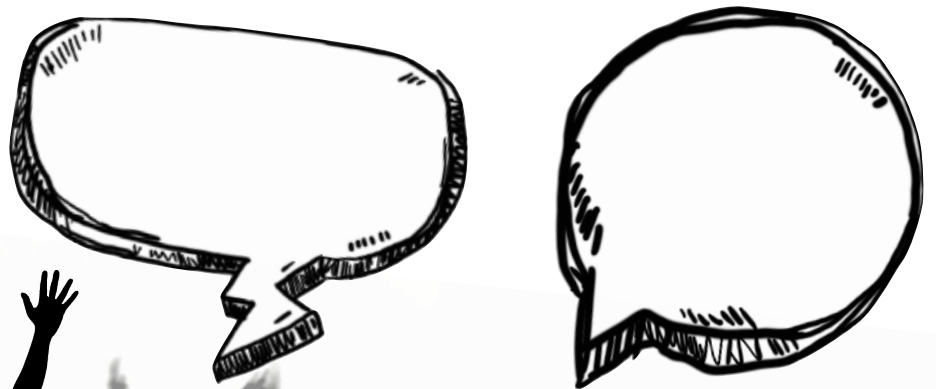
counted. Let's have a voice and make some noise as we are a big minority. That once has been counted we could be massive. Let's stick together to make our lives run better, no matter what your choice in life is.

I would like to be a role model by helping in any way people that are like me, gay, bi, transgender, transsexual. Even if it's writing in your Newsletter or trying to encourage more people in the prison system and outside to be there for each other.

Although I sound a strong character, yes I've faced some

problems in the past. But what we all need to do — no matter how young or old — is to be there for each other as one good friend is better than having no friend at all. I would like to let our gay community know that I'm there for them 100% no matter what. Yes so what's wrong with being different, because if we were all the same, it would be boring.

I feel coming to prison has made me a better understanding person and it's made me realise that even in the gay community in prison we all act differently and no one person is the same.





The Bent Bars Collective aims to include the contributions we receive as they are submitted, without making significant editorial changes to content or style (beyond spelling and grammar corrections when necessary).

However, due to space constraints some articles are edited for length. We also sometimes edit content for privacy and confidentiality reasons. 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.

Distribution is free so if you'd like a copy, just ask! We welcome all your thoughts, comments and replies to questions raised in these pages.

This newsletter is printed by the Footprint Workers Co-op in Leeds ([www.footprinters.co.uk](http://www.footprinters.co.uk)). Bent Bars would like to thank Footprint for their ongoing generosity and support. A big thanks also to Jacob B, who did the newsletter layout and contributed the drawings/artwork included in this edition.

# EDITOR'S NOTE

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Some of the names of people referred to in this newsletter have been changed for privacy and confidentiality reasons (noted with an asterisk\*). We understand that many newsletter contributors wrote to pay public tribute to positive role models in their lives and might have preferred that the actual names of those people be printed. At the same time, we are mindful that some contributions include quite personal information and we would not want to disclose sensitive information about other people without their consent. When contributors are writing about a friend, family member or fellow prisoner, we have no way of contacting the other person to ask if they consent to having information printed about them. So to protect people's confidentiality, we have made the editorial decision to change names where we felt it appropriate.



# CALL-OUT FOR THE NEXT NEWSLETTER:

The theme for the next newsletter is **'Imagining the Future: What would you put in a time capsule?'** Imagine you can choose five items to put in a time capsule that will be buried in the ground to be found by future generations in 200 years. What would you choose to put inside the capsule and why?

Suggestions for things to write about:

- What would you like future generations to know about today?
- What do you think future generations would have to say about life today?
- What kinds of objects would you include in the time capsule and why? Would you include music, film, books, other things?
- What kind of message would you leave with the objects?
- What stories about those objects would you want to tell future generations?
- What lessons might people learn about life today?
- How do you think future generations might respond to your time capsule? What do you think they might have to say?
- What do you hope for the future?

The newsletter theme is always just a suggestion. So if you'd like to write about something else, or respond to something that was written in a previous newsletter, please feel free. And as always we welcome stories, letters, poetry, drawings and whatever else you'd like to send us.

How to contact us:

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[bentbarsproject.org](http://bentbarsproject.org)

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.



Feel free to pass this newsletter on to anyone else who might be interested.