

When Pen Strikes Paper | BY JULI MILLER

A thank you note seemed in order. I had been reading *True Notebooks*, by Mark Salzman, in two nonstop sessions, quietly weeping and laughing out loud through the rich flow of comic, tragic, and searing passages of innocence and recognition. In this nonfiction work, Salzman recounts the transformative experience of conducting a writing class for teenagers incarcerated in Los Angeles Central Juvenile Hall while waiting for their court trials and sentencing. Many were being tried for murder. Kevin Jackson had shot at several members of a gang, killing one.

At the beginning of his first class, Salzman asks a shy Kevin, "What can you tell me that would give me some sense of who you are?"

"I don't know who I am. Somebody lost, I guess," the tall orphan answers. And then Kevin writes his first piece of many poignant pieces for Salzman. He describes a Saturday after both his parents had died. His third grade teacher picked him up at his grandmother's place and took him to the Museum of Science & Industry. She bought him a "Slinky" at the museum gift shop, they had hamburgers and ice cream for dinner, and she gave him a goodbye hug. "I know it wasn't a spectacular day, but I cherish that day because that was the only person that took time out of their life to help me make it through the death of my parents," he concludes. From that point on, Kevin was my favorite among a raucous collection of characters living behind bars.

Salzman becomes a role model for Kevin and provides him writing prompts that elicit prose with clarity and emotional power. The book chronicles Kevin's personal growth and assumption of a leadership role with his peers. He also develops an affectionate and respectful relationship with a number of the authority figures. Kevin is clearly interested in and capable of transcending his background and transforming his life.

And then comes the reeling shock: a sixty-six-years-to-life sentence handed down to Kevin. He is immediately

transferred to an adult maximum-security prison to begin a long and bleak stretch of time.

The book closes with the poem Salzman receives from Kevin a few months later.

Dear Friend

Hello, there old friend
At the moment I'm kind of down
It seems as though this is the end
I haven't had the chance to see you around.

I've been sitting here bereft,
Alone, locked down
But now I have a window
And see you every night
Times are hard, but I'll be all right.

Gun towers, barbed wire is all I see
No matter how far I travel
I glance up, and there you'll be.
It's good to have a friend like you
At times you help me shine through.

I still have a long journey to go
But I'll be free again
I'll use this time to grow
In not just one way, but all
There's a lot for me to learn
So I'm gonna start like a baby, with a crawl.

Though the road may seem
Long and far
Eventually I'll make it

Dear old friend, North Star.

With swollen eyes, I searched for Salzman's email address. I had met him at the Sun Valley Writers Conference numerous times, as he had become one of my favorite authors after I read *Iron and Silk* and *Lost in Place*, two other autobiographical books. He had given me his email address so we could work on arranging some presentations for him at La Sierra University, my alma mater, where I occasionally did guest lectures or sponsored programs for the English and Communication students.

Did he happen to have the prison address for Kevin? I wanted to thank him for allowing Salzman to share the pieces he penned while in juvenile hall. Mark sent the address. I mailed out a brief note of appreciation and jumped back into my busy schedule. I did not want to think about the book any more because the ending left me feeling angry and sad.

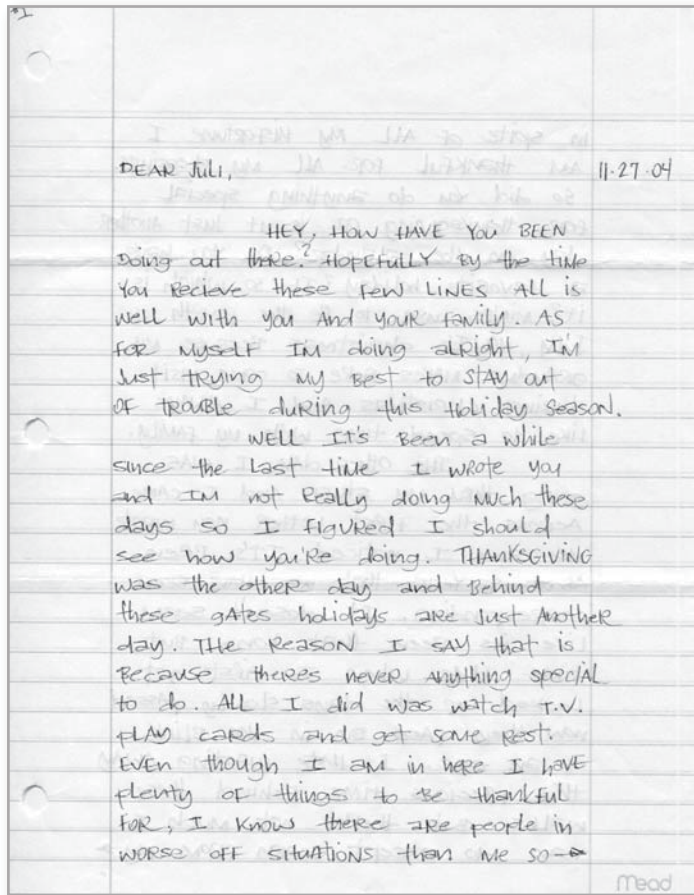
Soon I was opening a letter from Ironwood State Prison. The precise penmanship and correct spelling, the standard letter format, and the warm and gracious comments surprised me as much as receiving a response from Kevin.

Though I couldn't rescue Kevin, I could write back, keep the ball in play—let him know someone on the outside remembers him and where he is. And now we have been sending this ball back and forth through the prison bars for over thirteen years. In the age of texting, posting, and tweeting, we exchange handwritten letters

mailed in stamped envelopes and hope the prison mail system will deliver both ways so Christmas and birthday cards can be opened in time. He often writes about the boredom and isolation that are his constant companions—“Loneliness is poison to the soul”—and the daily struggle to not let his surroundings or setbacks discourage him for long. His customary closing words “and so, until pen strikes paper again” or “until I land at your doorstep again” always make

me smile.

We exchanged simple tidbits about ourselves in the early letters, seeking common ground as we perceived many contrasts in our lives besides the fact that he was a twenty-something and I was old enough to be his grandmother. His favorite holiday had been the Fourth of July—we both love exploding fireworks. However, now that he was



behind bars, he looked forward to Christmas most of all since that was when his grandmother or aunt promised to visit him.

He couldn't imagine what it was like for me to spend substantial time in the mountains where elk and moose roam, trout hide in the shadows of year-round streams, and aspen leaves shimmer below big blue skies. A “city boy,” he yearned for peace, tranquility, open spaces and freedom from noise and air pollution. The farthest distances Kevin had traveled from Los Angeles were to Las Vegas and Oakland, places

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heavy on concrete and light on nature.

During the first stage of our letter exchanges, I was constantly traveling for my work with resort properties or with healthcare clients: the Great Lakes, Myrtle Beach, Pensacola, San Juan Islands, Napa Valley, San Francisco, Lake Tahoe, and Sacramento. On weekends, my husband Barry and I would be in the mountains of Idaho or Montana to ski, bike, hike, fish, or fly the back-country river canyons and mountain ridges with a year-round flow of friends or family of all ages from around the country.

Kevin would note the contrast between the enormous variety of activities, people and locations in my life and his severely limited world. "I think I'm burned out on this place after seeing the same people and doing basically the same thing day after day...I know one thing: this vacation I'm on now sure isn't that much fun." With guilt, I sent him many postcards with a few short lines because I didn't have much time to write long six- or eight-page letters like he did. "Those postcards are like a small vacation from every day prison life...It makes me miss my freedom more, and I realize I could be doing so many other things besides sitting in jail."

I worked with resort clients who were trying to decide what kinds of luxury brand coffee makers, spa soaps, or organic bed and bath linens to use in sumptuous hotel suites. Another client sold legacy ranches with thousands of acres of

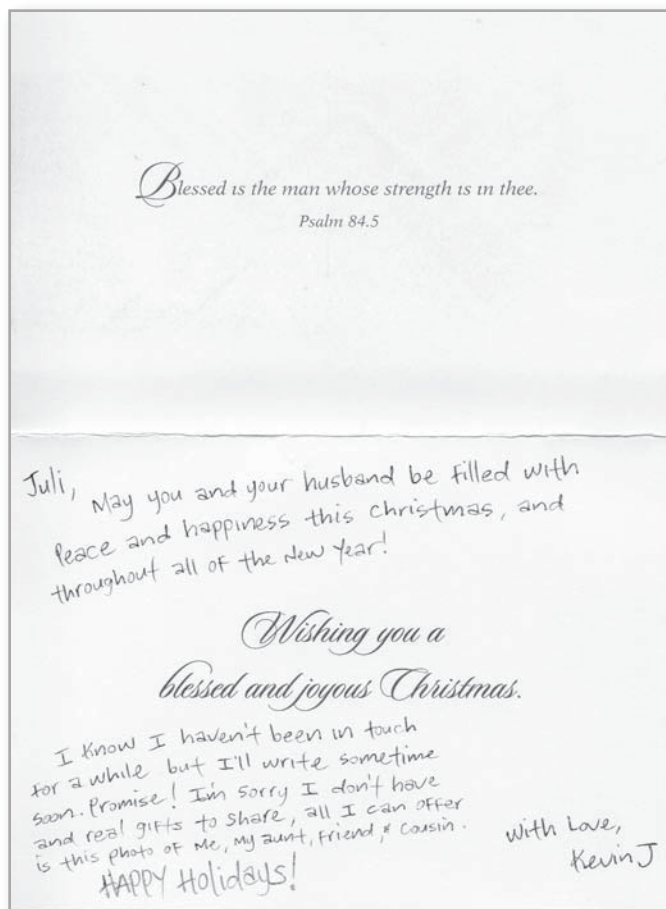
wildlife habitat, blue-ribbon trout streams, timber stands or grasslands to people who would vacation there a few weeks each year. Most recently, I assisted a client with launching a private-jet charter club so members could travel in Lear jets with maximum ease and lower costs. Every letter from Kevin made these high-pressure projects seem to be relatively insignificant missions.

I began to pray that someday I could take him for a summer hike in the mountains with our

dogs, or snowshoe through winter forests and toss a few snowballs at each other. He'd probably love feeling the warmth of a crackling campfire and hearing the howling coyotes. He said he wanted to go flying with me. Was there any way he could be released before I was dead or too old to do anything?

Kevin mentioned tutoring someone else for

GED exams, loaning personal items to a new prisoner who did not yet have access to any of his belongings, or signing up for a new correspondence class when he had sufficient funds from family members to enroll. He strived to stay busy, to steer clear of troublemakers, and to work on an associate college degree in social and behavioral science. Kevin pushed himself to organize his study time and do well, despite all the prison distractions, so he could develop discipline and perseverance that would be a tool for success if he were ever free



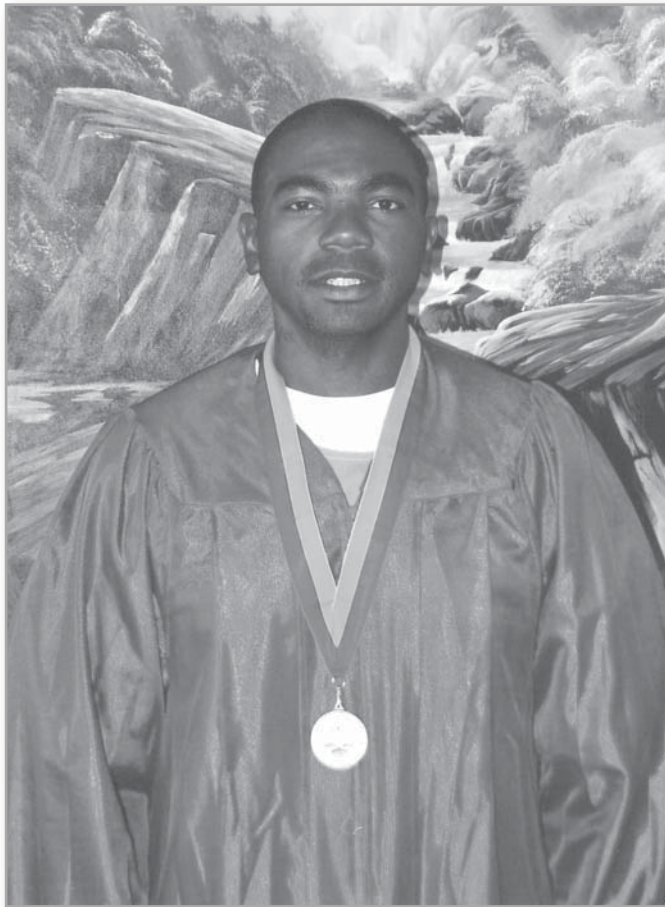
again. He attended AA and NA sessions to learn more about recovering from addiction, though he had never been involved with drugs or alcohol, and he looked forward to Bible study groups where he became more acquainted with the power and promises of God. His constant refrain of wanting to make the best use of his time and improve himself made me feel like I needed to step up my game, too.

Fairly early in our exchanges, we discovered we were both NBA and NFL fans. Our letters would usually get longer during the championship playoff stretches each year. Kevin was a Laker fan, and I cheered for the San Antonio Spurs, bragging about the prowess of Duncan, Ginobili and Parker. He was relieved when Kobe finally received the MVP award and proud that the Lakers could advance without Shaq. "I guess it is time for the Lakers to rebuild. Your Spurs look like they're headed for the finals!" During football season, he'd root for the California NFL teams but also keep an eye on my Boise State Broncos. We both imagined the fun of watching games together some day. "I guess we will have to keep praying for that miracle," he penned.

In 2007, Kevin's emotional anchor and key link to others in his family, his grandmother, died and things worsened at the Ironwood State Prison in Blythe, California. "The Knuckleheads," as he called them, would get into gang or racial confrontations in the exercise yard, often when it

was 110 degrees out there and their cells were suffocating hot boxes. Not only did this throw them all into miserable weeks of lockdown status, but no visitors were permitted for months, including the Christmas holiday season.

Kevin reached out with two special requests: Would I apply for visitation privileges? Would I be willing to send him a quarterly package since nobody in his family was able to do that for the time being? "When it feels like it's too much or



too hard, I bow my head in prayer and ask the Lord to give the strength to keep going. I know that He is the only one who can give me peace and comfort during my most trying times."

I submitted the documents for visitation approval, and I learned how to order a package of assorted items for him every three or four months. What does a young

man in a desert-prison cell select from a catalog sanctioned by the prison authorities? Jif creamy peanut butter, pepper jack cheese, mackerel fillets, jalapeno potato chips, double-chocolate cupcakes, Dolly Madison crunch donut gems, Irish Spring soap, Refreshing Waterfall shampoo, Cool Zone antiperspirant, mouthwash, and crew socks and Hanes t-shirts.

Kevin acknowledged his sweet tooth. "I always loved dessert. One of my aunts, who passed away from breast cancer, used to make the best peach cobbler. She knew I loved it. So

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every Christmas and Thanksgiving she would make a dish especially for me to take home. That is one of the things I miss most...."

Kevin promptly sends a thank you note every time he receives the quarterly package. "Thank you for always being there and supporting me. I can't even explain what it has done for me to know that someone out there truly cares for me. Growing up, one of the main reasons I got mixed up with the wrong crowd is I wanted to feel loved and accepted. They made me "think" they cared and were my friends... I see today that you are what I've always sought. I thank you for showing me that REAL love. Today I want to make my REAL friends proud of me."

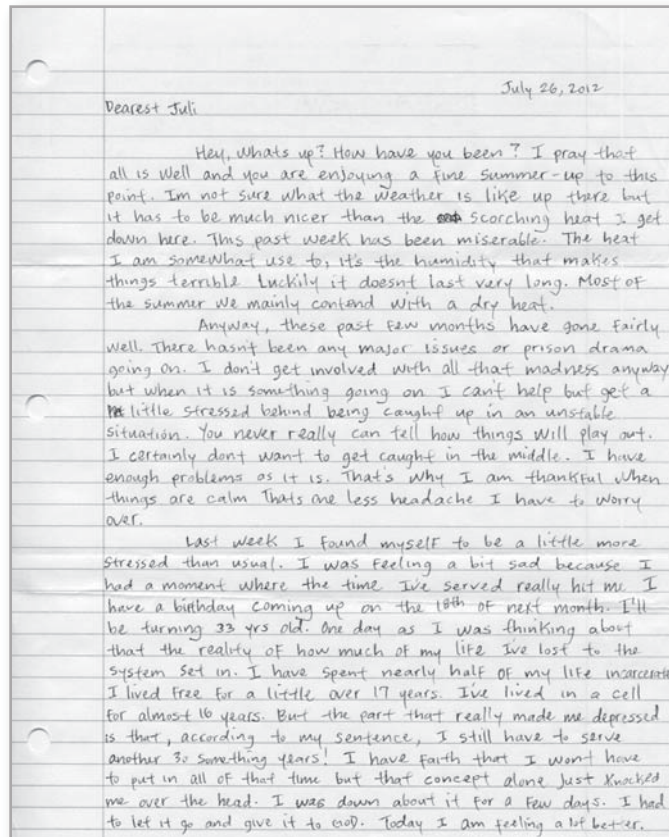
In fact, Kevin has behaved like a very good friend to me all these years. Always asks about my family and my dogs. Worries about all the joint surgeries my husband and I have had. Expresses relief that our home survived several big wild-fires. Wishes me safe travels and a good time when I go to my school reunions or vacations. Encourages me on tough consulting projects that require very long and intense hours. Sends holiday and birthday greetings.

In 2009, Kevin wrote about a political event for the first time. "I watched the inauguration of our 44th president.... I didn't think I would ever see a person of color become president, but it's very encouraging to see people moving past old, outdated practices and beliefs. It gives me hope that one day something could change with the

courts that would allow me to taste freedom again." With those optimistic words from Kevin, I found myself believing he might not reach old age behind bars.

I began to pay more attention to prison ministry and transitional programs, as well as judicial developments in California. I remembered the Delancey Street Foundation's impressive legacy in San Francisco. At no cost to taxpayers or clients, the organization provides a home,

training, support and work for people who are starting over after incarceration. More recently, Father Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest, founded Homeboy Industries in a gang-neutral part of Los Angeles on the edge of Chinatown. My friend, filmmaker Freida Mock, produced *G-Dog*, a documentary about Father Greg and his organization



which has redirected the lives of thousands, offering a second chance to find a life with healthy purpose, skills and relationships: Jobs Not Jail; Nothing Stops a Bullet Like a Job; Planning a Future Instead of a Funeral. If only Kevin could be released before 2041. There was a movement in California to change the parole process for prisoners who had committed crimes as juveniles and received adult sentences. We both clutched the possibility quietly and tightly.

New developments and anxieties appeared in his letters during 2012 and 2013. For years he had continuously applied for a chance to work, but he was at the bottom of the list because his

sentence was so long. Finally, he was given a job in the dining room as a line server. This meant scooping food onto plates and cleaning the floors after meals were served. Pay was eight cents an hour. They deducted 55 percent for restitution he owed. At the end of the month, he cleared \$2 or \$3. As Kevin wrote, "The only real benefit is that we are allowed to eat whatever food is leftover."

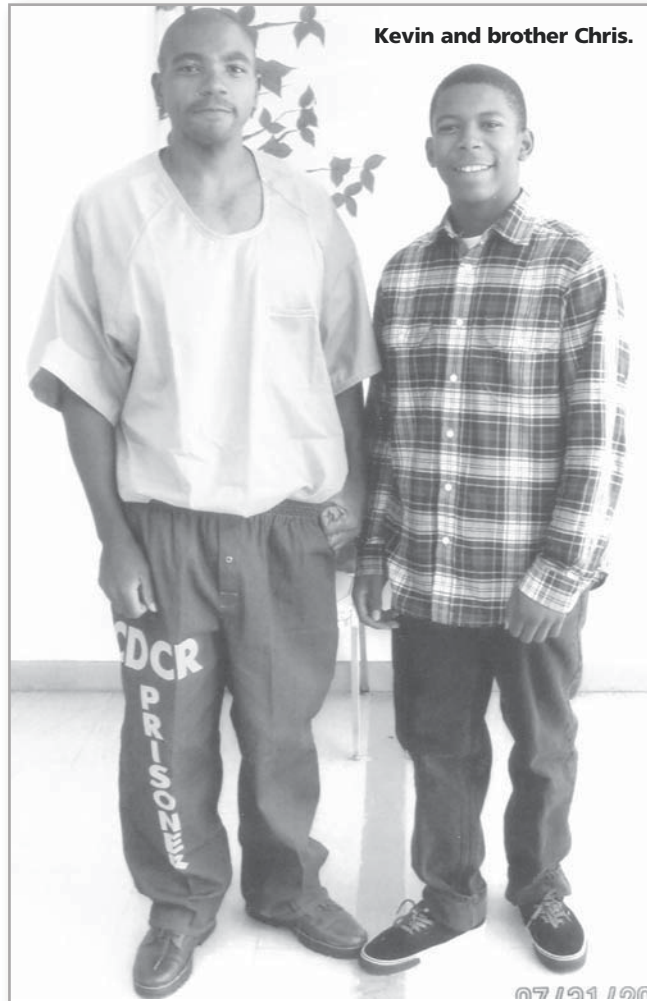
There was increasing talk about moving large numbers of inmates to other facilities as the state reorganized the types of inmates and programs at many sites. Kevin fretted about the hardship it would be for his family to visit him if he was farther away from the LA area. And he was insecure about learning how to survive in a different set-up where he might be "rotting away for another 28 years."

Folsom Prison became his new home in 2013. Years ago, I had lived in nearby El Dorado Hills when Folsom was not much more than the Folsom Dam; the

prison was made famous when Johnny Cash sang "And I ain't seen the sunshine since I don't know when, I'm stuck in Folsom prison, and time keeps draggin' on." I was embarrassed that I had not made it down to visit him at Ironwood Prison after I had been approved to do so. So, I planned to apply for visitation privileges at Folsom Prison and meet him in person there someday.

Kevin described the move to Folsom as a

nightmare. The multi-day bus-trip transfer, with shackles on his ankles and wrist, was long and miserable. His personal things were withheld for weeks upon arrival. There were so many prisoners that they were stuck in their cells most of the time and lines were long for everything. Showers, toilets, phones and exercise yard privileges were limited, as were access to classes, self-help groups and job training. In his desperation, he spent much



Kevin and brother Chris.

time in prayer. "I'm putting it all on His shoulders and keeping the faith that my journey in this life is all part of His divine plan." He wanted to request a transfer to another prison, where he might have a chance at finding a job or receiving training as a paralegal aide or alcohol and drug counselor.

Then a few things shifted for Kevin. Standing in the exercise yard

one spring day, he glimpsed the rolling green hills surrounding the prison. And a flock of geese passed overhead. After a decade in the scorching desert, where the wildlife consisted of "insects, reptiles and critters," to see hills covered with green grass, leafy oak trees and water fowl winging their way through the skies was refreshing. Nature calmed his soul.

The January 2014 passage of SB260 in California created hope, turmoil and fear in Kevin's

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soul. The bill, entitled *Justice for Juveniles with Adult Prison Sentences*, established a new parole evaluation process for young offenders who had received adult sentences. Knowing there was a chance to be outside the prison bars before he would be an old man raised hopes for an earlier exit from the iron cage. But it was daunting to wonder if he could find *pro bono* legal assistance to work with him in time to request and prepare adequately for the parole hearings. What if he was disqualified for a hearing? What if he had to wait ten or fifteen more years to be selected for a hearing? What if he was not determined to be a suitable candidate for release by the commissioners? Failing was frightening. "I sit in here some nights and think about how being in the free world is going to be... Last time I was out there I was just a teen. I didn't have any real responsibilities... I've never had a job. Never had a car. Never even had to pay a bill... I will really be starting from scratch as a grown man." By now, he had spent more of his birthdays behind bars than outside.

On April 23, 2016, Kevin wrote to let me know he is scheduled for a September 14 initial hearing with the parole board. I thought of certain statements he made in letters in the past year: "I know in my heart I will never commit another crime... I am confident that I can restart my life and be a productive citizen." He was determined to be someone his family and friends could be proud of again. I also remembered his remarks about raising himself on the streets of Compton after his parents died and then putting so much solitary effort into learning how to resolve feeling insignificant, unloved and depressed.

"These days I have trouble staying in the

moment. I am already thinking about my life beyond these walls..." And I'm ready to bake him a peach cobbler.

This relationship started with my writing a thank-you note to Kevin in 2003. Now I will write a letter of support for him to share with the commissioners at the hearing in September.

And then I must remember to write Kevin one more thank-you note.

For keeping me aware of the freedoms and abundance in my life.

For reminding me how relatively trivial most annoyances, disappointments or problems outside of prison bars tend to be.

For demonstrating how a lonely teenager caught up in a gang culture can cross over

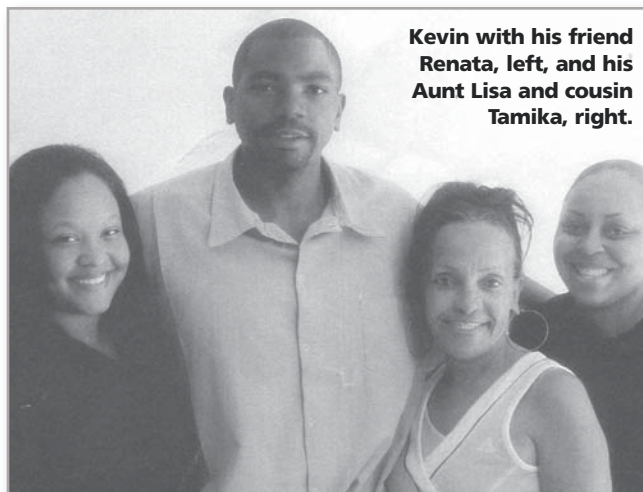
to a redemptive path despite all the barriers.

For confirming the transformative magic of friendship, of being a North Star for someone.

For putting a spotlight on the forgiveness, second chances, and possibilities God promises to all and requests we offer each other.

For putting a face on why we must keep working to improve the criminal justice system.

For being brave enough to join Mark's writing class and allow pen to strike paper. ■



Kevin with his friend Renata, left, and his Aunt Lisa and cousin Tamika, right.

Visit InsideOutWriters.org where Jimmy Wu, one of the original students in Mark Salsman's class, is now on the staff. The mission is to reduce juvenile recidivism rates.

Juli Miller is a member of the *Spectrum* editorial board and a health care consultant. She lives in Sun Valley, Idaho where



she regularly attends the Sun Valley Writers Conference. It was there that she first met author Mark Salzman who introduced her to several of his juvenile hall writing students, with whom she became a pen pal.