

# Aging Behind Bars

## Perspectives from Incarcerated Men in the United States

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### Introduction

Since the 1980s, commonly attributed to the “War on Drugs,” the prison population in the United States has risen, making the country the one with the highest incarceration rate worldwide. While the U.S. comprises only five percent of the world’s population, it houses 25 percent of the world’s prison population (Hurley 2018, 27) with a total of 2.3 million people currently living behind bars. Apart from the number of people incarcerated, the United States is also leading the statistics of longest prison sentences in the world. Therefore, the number of people who will age behind bars continues to rise. Especially people with a life sentence will face the challenges of old age in an already challenging environment that is not equipped with facilities and attitudes of care. I understand care not only as an interest in the well-being of others but also as the structural and institutional means to facilitate care-work.

As over 90% of all people incarcerated in the United States are male and housed in all-male facilities, the aspect of masculinity plays a crucial role in discussions of aging behind bars. However, masculinity intersects with issues of class and race that are highly relevant in U.S. prisons. Publications of recent years, especially Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2012) or Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy* (2015) highlight the complicated role systemic racism plays in the process of mass incarceration in

the United States. While I recognize the complicated grit of race, class, gender, and age, I will not be able to entangle these components satisfactorily in this article. Concerning the U.S. prison system, I highly recommend Marie Gottschalk's profound study *Caught* (2014), which succeeds in further complicating the identity constellations of prisoners within the structures of American politics.

Rather than providing a profound analysis of aging behind bars, I would like to use this article to present a diversity of voices on aging from incarcerated men in different correctional institutions in the United States. Due to my role as a creative writing teacher, I am able to facilitate conversations in prison environments and collect original voices that often remain unheard otherwise. Thus, I understand this paper as a forum for these voices and the material they provide for further discussion.

However, the voices of the men are, of course, already mediated and selected by me, as I also provide the transition and the context. The texts I include here were either part of creative writing assignments (and therefore conceptualized as fiction) or shared in personal correspondences. I did not edit the writing. All men gave me permission to include their thoughts here. I am grateful for their generous trust and apologize if my interpretation of their voices compromises the agenda they had in mind. Due to prison regulations, I am only able to use the writer's first name. As aging in prison, and aging in general, is not a smooth, clear and linear procedure, this text is likewise a collage that illustrates in its format the conflicting processes.

I divided the material in three different sections arranged by topics that reappeared in the writing or my research. The first section will introduce different portrayals of elderly men addressing care on a personal level. The second section will present a Senior Center in its creation process in the State Correctional Facility of the city of Chester. Here an institutional attempt for care will be discussed by also highlighting the perspective of one of the center's initiators who is an incarcerated man with a life sentence. The last section is devoted to self-care and health issues.

## **“I never did know his real name” – Perspectives on Aging and Dying in Prison**

Frank was born in 1933 and is currently serving a life sentence in the State Correctional Institution of Phoenix, the largest maximum-security prison in Pennsylvania with a population of approximately 3,000 men. He is a writer, occasionally publishing poetry and short stories. In the following text Frank, himself elderly, describes an elderly inmate.

*Home*

by Frank

He was an old guy when I met him. I never did know his real name. Had an Indian nickname. Once in a while, I almost come up with it. It wasn't like Brave Warrior or Running Bear. He was called after one of the tribes—like, Apache. It's on the tip of my tongue. He was the only convict who could go and come when he wanted. You might see him anywhere. Him and his baggy pants. Carried an old cloth bag—wide and deep—something like what the fellas used on ice-trucks years ago. The guy had a bit of everything in his cell. If you lost a button, or knob off your TV or radio, he'd find you one. They said he didn't want to go home. Been in prison too long. Some forty years. They said the world had changed too much. I'd heard him say one time, “Go home? This is my home. . .” I don't know if he meant it. He collected stamps. We guys saved them for him. And on a rare occasion—when he wasn't in those baggy pants—he'd hold court on the radiator. Would have his yellowish-gray hair combed to the side. Wore it kind of long. He'd take a puff on his cigar, then smile like he owned the world. I guess a good cigar does that to a fella. When he got sick, he fought to stay out of the hospital. His ankles swelled up so he hardly could walk. The guys would pull him on a wagon to the medication line. He'd wave like an old bear in the circus. The guys kept up a good face. But we felt bad for the old-timer. I was off the cell-block when they carried him out. About a week later we got

the news. I still think of that old-timer. But I never did know his real name.<sup>1</sup>

The shock of death with the realization that one does not know the name or not know the person who passed away is a very common theme in the writing by incarcerated men. It is particularly striking in Frank's piece, as he himself is an elderly person, surely struggling with health issues. The man in his autobiographical creative piece is a curiosity but also a source of pity. The story speaks of care as the other men assist him to receive his medication and support his decision to stay out of the prison hospital, as the hospital units are notorious for their lack of care and horrifying hygienic conditions. "Home" is as much a description of an old man in prison as it is an obituary to the man without a name. It honors the man who passed away, yet the description reveals that Frank hardly knew him. As such, it portrays the anonymity in prison.

A similar note was sent to me by Russell, currently serving a life sentence at a facility in Delaware which houses about 2,500 men. Russell has spent the past three decades behind bars with little hope for parole. In a personal correspondence (August 14<sup>th</sup> 2021), he writes about the aging process of a friend:

I can vividly recall witnessing an older prisoner, who I'd befriended during the first few months of my sentence suddenly lose his sense of hope, and shortly afterwards rapid deterioration consumed his entire being. It was like watching a ripe fruit gradually rot. The spark his eyes once held had dimmed, and his robust physique steadily dwindled. He had transformed into a moldy raisin, and within a year, he was gone. If I had to guess, I'd place his age roughly around 70. But who could say for sure what exactly the catalyst was, that tipping point that led to my friend's precipitous decline and demise. Perhaps he grew weary of the many years of mistreatment he's received from an apathetic medical staff, who routinely left bedridden patients unattended for days, as they wallow in their soiled sheets.

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1 With kind permission by Frank and Jayne Thompson who facilitated the creative writing workshop in 2013 in which this piece was written.

On the other hand, perhaps it was the emergence of some latent psychological reaction stemming from those 23 hour a day stints in the sensory depriving isolation unit he'd endured for months as a younger man. [...] In addition ... my friend had to overcome losing a lower leg to diabetes. The strictly regulated movements and access to outdoor exercise, concomitant with malnutritious meals ... certainly took a deadly toll upon his health.

As I reflect upon my friend's final moments, it occurred to me that he was dying alone in his isolated cell in the prison infirmary. All family support had dried up years ago. He received no visits or letters. I can still picture him sitting there in his wheelchair with those vacuous eyes, his drawn-in cheeks, and small sagging shoulders – with death knocking at the door. A cold chill ran through me as I pondered, 'Will that be me one day?'

(Personal Correspondence, August 14, 2021)

Like Frank in his text "Home", Russell writes about a memory of his early years in prison. Coping with the verdict of a life sentence, the reality of aging behind bars manifests in an elderly convict who mirrors their own fate and whose physical condition – depending on medication and being in a wheelchair due to leg amputation – causes extreme anxiety. Russell looks for the causes of the fading mental and physical health of his friend. He refuses to accept these conditions to be due to aging only, pointing sharply to the conditions of incarceration. He looks for his friend's past, surely also in an attempt to rewrite his own future.

Russell is recalling his friend at an age that makes him painfully aware of his own fragility and health issues behind bars as Frank likewise writes his story when he is an elderly inmate himself. Interestingly, neither Frank nor Russel addresses their own mental and physical struggles. However, the tenderness of their writing, the careful crafting of the people they describe, reveal their care. Frank playfully compares the man to a circus bear, certainly in the sense of a likeable person, although the comparison also reduces the man to an object of entertainment. Except for the statement that the man calls prison his home, we do not get his perspective in the story. By not quite believing this statement, Frank reveals his own position: Home to him is not prison, and yet he

has likewise spent the majority of his life behind bars and will likely die there. The story reveals the fact that Frank refuses to acknowledge this process as much as the longing for a life behind bars.

Russell uses a raisin to compare his friend to, a sweet fruit that changes shape as it dries. He goes back to his metaphor when he mentions the support that had dried up, the fruit therefore becomes an illustration of the physical as well as mental condition of his friend but it also represents the missing care and support system. The image of the unresponsive man sitting in his wheelchair reflects Russell's shock as he realizes the possibilities of his own condition rapidly changing for the worse. The lack of care by the hospital and prison staff is a fact, as Russell describes it, the lack of family care often a result of dysfunctional families to begin with or the consequences of long prison sentences in remote locations that make an active and lively relationship often additionally difficult.

Lack of care as a symptom of prison life is addressed by Terrance in my personal correspondence. Terrance is in his early forties and recently managed to overturn a decades-long prison sentence in SCI Phoenix, Pennsylvania. While still incarcerated, Terrance wrote:

As I'm sitting here typing this letter, there is an old man dead on the tier beneath me, my neighbor, a block worker just came to the door and told my celly that old man Dave just died. I did not know old man Dave, nor did I know the other old man who died a few weeks ago from Covid. Old man Dave was sick, but he did not have Covid. It's sad because people die and nobody cares, nobody really wants to reflect on the depth of death by incarceration, which to me is double torture. [...] To be sick in prison is like being sick in the desert and no one is around to help – here, in prison, the only people who will help have no power to do anything.

(Personal Correspondence March 23, 2021).

Terrance openly reflects on death and on the fact that death is a common companion of prison life. The person who died has a name in his writing, Dave, and by naming him “old man Dave” Terrance indicates that

the man, though dying of sickness, was an elderly inmate who must have been known for his name to travel. Due to the omnipresence of death in prison “nobody cares”. Terrance is concerned about the lack of care on an administrative level and acknowledges the resignation. It seems, according to Terrance, very frustrating to care as he generalizes and writes that those “who will help have no power to do anything” – while it remains unclear who “those” are.

None of these statements involve concrete descriptions of care (except Frank’s mentioning of a group of inmates helping the man to get his medication when he was unable to do so himself), rather the fear of not being cared for as it is blamed on the prison system. All three perspectives vividly show the impersonal atmosphere of prison life where it is best to stick to yourself, be aware of the gossip but do everything to avoid becoming part of it.

### **“Mentors, Father Figures and Peace Makers” – Perspectives on the Senior Center Project**

The previously presented perspectives lament the lack of professional, effective, institutional care in correctional facilities in the United States. However, the State Correctional Institution Chester, in Pennsylvania is about to change the lack of care for the elderly in the prison system by creating a Senior Center behind bars. The SCI Chester is an all-male medium security facility in the city of Chester in Pennsylvania and the temporary home of roughly 1.200 inmates. This is less than half compared to the population numbers in the facilities that Frank, Russell, and Terrance live in at the point of their writing. It is also important to highlight that the other prisons mentioned before are all maximum-security prisons housing also people on death row with a particularly high number of long-term inmates which is not the case for the SCI Chester. Therefore, it is the more interesting that the Senior Center, one of the first of its kind behind bars, emerges in Chester. It was scheduled to open in 2020, but then the Covid-19 pandemic hit. Nevertheless, the plans were finalized and only the opening (had to be) postponed.

In SCI Chester, the average age is 38. The facility was designed to provide men who are serving a shorter prison sentence and have a history of substance abuse with therapeutic and educational programming. However, a few men serving life are also accommodated there and at first glance, the topic of aging is especially relevant for those men since they will spend most of their lives behind bars and will pass away in prison. However, aging is also a relevant issue for offenders who return to prison, those having a long criminal history, and the group of first-time offenders older than 50 years. The Department of Corrections considers inmates 50 years or older ‘elderly’, and SCI Chester currently has more than 180 elderly inmates – approximately 18 percent of its population (*Correctional Newsfront* 2020). Nearly 25 percent of the overall U.S. prison population is 50 years or older (Hurley 2018, 17). In a report about conditions for the elderly in prisons in the U.S., Human Rights Watch focusses on populations 65 and older (Hurley 2018, 17).

The idea for the Senior Center at SCI Chester was born in 2019, when a team of older incarcerated men began planning the center as a place for friendly exchange and community space as well as a symbolic place of honor for themselves and their peers. I had the privilege of visiting the large room that will serve as the central meeting point for the center that is decorated with murals of people the men admire, like Angela Davis, and a cozy corner with red armchairs. While the grey brick walls and the floor still reminded the center’s visitors of prison, the attempt to create a space that does not feel like prison was evident. After pandemic restrictions will be lifted, the center will serve as a community place and recreational activity area.

As one man explained to me, the people who will use this center “are mentors, father figures and peace makers” who feel very much “underappreciated by the Department of Corrections” (Personal Correspondence with Michael, January 4, 2021). The extended function of the Senior Center is already apparent here. As prisoners experience the loss of identity and material possessions, the loss of autonomy, occupational status, heterosexual relationships, and societal rejection (Coretta 2012, 126), the need to matter and be influential is understandable. As such, the center is also relevant as a place of privilege and thus marks the senior popula-

tion in the prison (especially the long-term inmates) as occupying a desirable place within the complicated prison hierarchies. Michael's statement also reveals the clash of masculinity visions inside prison walls and stresses the mental needs for long-term inmates.

Prison masculinities have inspired a number of studies and books, particularly focusing on its intersectional quality in correctional facilities. Prisoners come overwhelmingly often from disadvantaged populations, were often unemployed previous to their prison term or in precarious economic and living situations, and have histories of substance abuse and comparatively little education (Jewkes 32, 2002). Within the framework of gendered norms, men in prison are already emasculated – lacking power and economic influence. Conclusively, masculinity in prisons is often described as “hypermasculinity,” which is “an exaggerated form of key masculine conventions, particularly aggression, violent domination, and independence” (Coretta 2012, 126) that is practiced in order to compensate for the lack of gendered influence in society. While most men in prison come from populations that have established a certain habitus there is, in addition to the male performance they bring already with them to prison, a specific prison male performance that develops according to complex prison hierarchies that define status among the men by crime, length of the sentence, positions in the prison, and other factors (such as physical appearance, which is demonstrated by excessive workouts) (Jewkes 38, 2002).

Michael, who is referring to himself and other seniors at SCI Chester as “mentors, father figures and peace makers”, is a 60-year-old man serving a life sentence. The need to assign himself power that has been taken from him is apparent in his statement, but it is also a status symbol for those serving life in a prison that mainly houses offenders with shorter sentences. Thus, ‘lifers’ will see men come and leave constantly and can only build longer relationships within their own group. As one of the initiators of the Senior Center and a spokesperson for the group that will meet there, Michael writes in a letter to me about his role in the prison:

I've been incarcerated 37 years. Men like myself, who have spent decades behind bars have taken responsibility to maintain order

within institutions. Lifers, specifically, are the lifeblood between peers and the administration to maintain peace and order. We are mentors to the younger, hardheaded inmate population. We are the gatekeepers, facilitators and managers for every group, program and workshop that takes place within the institution. We introduce rookie officers to the prison environment by helping them transition safely and successfully through the prison environment. You hear incredible stories from Superintendents, staff and people who have made rank, about how inmates helped them with their careers and in some cases, their decision for advancement in the D.O.C. I saved an officer's life and prevented a riot and a gang war between whites and blacks and Crips and Bloods. I helped officers, especially young females, understand just how important being a Correctional Officer is to fulfilling life.

[...]

Lifers and long termers do a lot for the D.O.C., yet at the end of the day in the eyes of the system of justice, we're nothing but a number, a person that committed a crime and deserves to be locked up for decades. (Personal Correspondence, January 4, 2021)

In its *Correctional Newsfront* newsletter, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections frames the Senior Center as “designed to provide inmates older than 50 years with senior-specific programming and treatment with inmates their own age,” (2020) clearly stressing the therapeutic value and framing the center as part of the prison program for inmates. The newsletter also recognizes Michael's perspective, perhaps also as essential for attracting men to use the facility. Designed with the help of the gerontologist Ebony Johnson, the Senior Center seeks to serve as a quiet space with plants and fish but also as a place to do arts and crafts and other recreational activities for men older than 50, the newsletter writes (2020). Furthermore, the center seeks to prepare older inmates for reentry, addressing topics such as medical care and housing as well as employment, topics that will make Michael painfully aware of the fact that he will not be able to go home as many of the others will. The newsletter recognizes that “offering programs such as this can help encourage and motivate senior inmates, who can positively affect their

younger peers and the DOC staff,” (2020) confirming Michael’s role description and acknowledging the immense emotional stress that accompanies a life sentence or any prison sentence, particularly in older age.

## **“I do not [...] have any health problems” – Perspectives on the Aging Body**

Michael and the other initiators of the Senior Center are healthy men older than 50. They participate regularly in the educational and recreational programs that SCI Chester offers and have the mental strength and physical capacity to initiate and actively coordinate programming in the Senior Center according to their personal needs. After all, the Senior Center will depend on inmates and volunteers to function.

However, the center will not be able to provide care for those with special physical and mental needs. Besides urgent medical and physical needs for medication or such seemingly simple equipment as additional blankets and the necessity for accommodation for people with restricted mobility, Martha Hurley points out that elderly inmates are prone to violence and extortion in the general population due to their weaker physical conditions (2018, 19). This is certainly not framed by Michael and not part of the Senior Center’s mission. Further issues that Hurley addresses are the need for caretakers when elderly prisoners need help getting dressed, eating and cleaning up after themselves (2018, 67), needs that remain unaddressed in my correspondences – also because men with special needs will be transferred to the prison hospital and no longer stay in the general population.

When I taught creative writing in Graterford in 2016, the largest maximum-security prison in Pennsylvania at the time with 3.500 men (the prison has been closed recently and replaced by Phoenix, a new facility of the same size), I met Billy who is in his late 60s. Incarcerated in his early twenties, Billy has a 60- to 90-year prison sentence and can expect parole at the earliest in his late seventies. I would like to include Billy’s voice because it reveals the work that staying healthy takes in

prison and therefore illustrates the harsh reality of those who have not been able to participate enough in prison programming and thus lack a voice within the prison. Those who cannot participate in meetings, who are physically and mentally not well enough to voice their needs, will inevitably be silenced inside a system that gives little voice even to those who are able enough to speak up. The threat of violence is very real.

A few years after teaching the prison class, I heard that Billy became severely ill. During our class, he always seemed a tough but tiny and fragile man, so I sent him a feel better card, also because I knew that Billy does not have family and receives neither letters nor visits. This is Billy's response:

I received the "Feel Better" card from [...] you. Thank you for the card [...] and also for your concern for me. However, I am afraid someone has given you wrong information. I was never in the prison hospital or any other hospital. I was sick about 6 weeks ago, and missed a [...] class. I think it was just the basic winter cold. I just did not want to go to the [...] class and take the chance of others catching my cold. [...] I do not take any type of medication, or have any health problems. I'm 5"9', and weigh between 150 and 170 pounds, depending on how hard I am working out. In fact, I was the only prisoner in Graterford last year to take Senior Fitness class on Sunday evening, Wellness class on Monday evening, Yoga class on Tuesday afternoon, Sports Conditioning class on Wednesday evening, and Yoga class again on Thursday evening. All these exercise classes took place in the prison Field House, two twelve week sessions for each class and I took all of them.

(Personal Correspondence, April 23, 2017)

First of all, I would like to acknowledge the amazing programs that Graterford had to offer at the time, concerning that there are senior fitness classes and opportunities designed for the elderly to stay fit and healthy (as far as this is possible inside the prison). However, on one occasion, Billy excused himself from the writing class in favor of 'conditioning' and on my way to the writing class, I saw the men running

up and down the stairs of the prison's lecture hall, which turned out to be the activity called 'conditioning class'.

Billy's attempt to stay firm and fit comes from a fear of damaged health, a fear that is very real in prison. This returns me to the initial stories by Frank and Russell whose descriptions of elderly inmates reveal their anxieties about their own health. However, younger inmates, who clearly dominate the prison population, can often not relate to the difficult process of aging. In my personal correspondence with Terrance, he vividly addresses the health issues of his cellmate:

Let me tell you what I'm dealing with (not complaining). I have a new cell mate, actually I'm on a new unit. My new cell mate is an older guy (62) with 38 years of prison time served on a life sentence. He has a lot of stuff which is understandable since he's been in prison almost as long as I've been alive. But he's a hoarder so a lot of his property is extra crap that he's collecting for a rainy day, and when you hold onto stuff in a small cell it becomes cluttered and difficult to clean. [...] My celly has no teeth, so he doesn't do any maintenance on his mouth, no gargling or brushing his tongue, so he has bad breath, and he farts all day, so either I'm smelling breath or fart, sometimes both. Could you imagine living in a room the size of a large closet, with another person, their clothes and shoes and food, and appliances, and their legal papers that can fill a trunk. All this is compounded by the fact that we are locked in here together for over 23 hours a day.

(Personal Correspondence, March 23, 2021)

Terrance's perspective is particularly valuable. For one, he describes an elderly inmate with a set of health issues that Terrance has somehow adopted as they are problems that affect him, too. While Frank and Russell, whom I quoted in the beginning, both reflect on an elderly inmate once they are experiencing aging themselves, Terrance does not relate the health issues to complaints that might catch up with his own body. He seems to judge his cellmate's struggles as solvable problems. He could take care of his oral hygiene, the letter seems to suggest, supervise his diet better and part with most of his belongings. To Terrance, these prob-

lems are not part of old age, yet he shows compassion for the situation of his cellmate by stressing the fact of the long time spent in prison. While Frank almost admiringly recalls the fact that the old man he describes in his story has everything in his cell, to Terrance, his cellmate (who seems likewise well equipped) is a hoarder.

The relationship between cellmates is often very challenging, as they are all confined to a very small space most of the time. Movement in prison was restricted particularly harshly under Covid-19 regulations. The lack of privacy seems to make care work impossible. Again, the man does not have a name in Terrance's letter, and we do not learn anything about him apart from the aspects that directly affect Terrance's well-being. However, in the earlier quoted remark about "old man Dave", the information about the death was passed on to the man Terrance describes and not to him (he just overhears the news). This shows that the man who challenges Terrance's daily life is connected enough in prison to have news about the death of someone personally delivered.

The report Terrance gives of the daily living conditions also shows how life can indeed become challenging for older prison inmates. While Terrance was waiting to be paroled and practiced patience on many levels, other incarcerated men might not have tolerated the inconveniences of sharing their cell with someone who might affect their daily lives. What is perceived as challenging is certainly up to the individual perspectives, yet a glimpse into the prison life provided here with ego-documents shows that particularly health issues and old age may make men targets of scorn and, thus, easy victims of violent outbursts.

## Conclusion

Aging in prison means aging in an environment that provides very limited possibilities of care. Apart from physical activities, the men lack mental challenges and receive food that is problematic in many ways. Additionally, the prison is a place with constant fear of punishment and violence by staff or other inmates. To have to depend on others in your daily routine makes you indeed fragile and likely to become a victim of

violence in an already violent system. As such, Billy's workout obsession, which is shared by many men behind bars, is not only a demonstration of masculinity and physical power, it is also a hoped-for strategy to stay young in an institution in which being old (and dependent) can be unimaginably horrifying. The insistence of the men I quoted here of being mentally and physically able reveals their fear of inability because they live in the presence of those who they fear to become one day. The Senior Center at SCI Chester seeks to provide stability and a place of hope that creates a momentary vision of healthy aging within prison walls. As such, it contributes immensely to the mental sanity of its inmates, but time will show if its management will succeed in including those who may need special assistance.

I would like to conclude with a poem Billy wrote in a writing class for a small publication in zine format (2016). It is the most fitting end for this article because as it thinks about staying young, it connects the past with the future and blurs the lines between the prison and the world outside.

## Staying Young

Late at night, dark outside,  
 suffering from insomnia, unable to sleep,  
 he does push-ups, and paces,  
 he is lean, hard, the consummate loner.  
 So stiffened and composed the lines of his face,  
 events could be dated by wrinkles he had acquired,  
 made time itself appear old-fashioned.  
 When he looks in the mirror, the enemy stares back,  
 it's a frightening vision, a quiet steady look,  
 a disarming smile, a face he doesn't know.  
 You said you would save me from snare,  
 falling for 90 years into a trap I dug myself.  
 He is stuck in a never ending dark night bog.  
 His story is not like a road one should follow,  
 more like a house, you go inside and live in darkness,  
 an altered life, viewed from bars, walls, and dark nights,

roaming in corridors that never led to freedom.  
 A dizzy variety of experiences, cultures, and men,  
 all these swept clean like a blackboard,  
 ignored, neglected, relegated to the darkness,  
 the human heap, slowly eroded.  
 All gone, the man that was,  
 the past restored, the process reversed,  
 staying young, really did exist,  
 only in thoughts and dreams,  
 preserving them in the darkness of sleep.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the men who generously shared their thoughts with me in personal correspondence and agreed to the publication of their valuable perspectives. Furthermore, I would like to thank Taneisha Spall and Capt. Lorie Eason for their correspondence and insights into the planning of the Senior Center at SCI Chester. My gratitude goes also to Jayne Thompson for the wonderful collaborative creative writing workshops and for sharing Frank's piece for this article.

