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Though I grew up within driving distance of the largest maximum-security prison in the United States, it was not until early 2010 that I learned details of the daily lives of incarcerated members of society or the opportunities, if any, presented to them in terms of bettering their current or future situations. I purchased a copy of Picking Cotton by Jennifer Thompson-Cannino and Ronald Cotton on a whim and it captivated me. On a narrative level it tells the story of Thompson-Cannino’s rape and her subsequent journey of placing her perpetrator behind bars. Though Ronald Cotton insisted on his innocence he only received his own justice and peace of mind 11 years later when DNA testing became available. On a larger level of social justice, the book opened my eyes to a few of the many pitfalls of our nation’s penal system.

On some level I wanted to become involved but spent the next several months moving across the country and beginning my new life as a graduate student. When I learned of Partakers, Incorporated and its program through my school, the Harvard Prisoner Education Project (HPEP), I knew I found my opportunity. I quickly jumped in as Co-Coordinator and have spent the past year building a remarkable friendship with my mentee as well as managing the three teams of Harvard academic mentors.

I can describe my mentee and friend Frantz Desir with a number of adjectives but none would do him justice. In the best possible sense, Frantz radiates compassion, tenacity, and loyalty. Though we all fancy ourselves busy, important people, Frantz leads a life inside the walls of Norfolk Correctional Institute that amazes me with its responsibilities and commitments. He balances a job and a host of leadership positions throughout the prison with a taxing course load in a variety of subjects. He just recently graduated with honors and Boston University inducted him into their chapter of Alpha Sigma Lambda, an honor society that sought out Frantz personally for membership months before. In addition to all of this he makes plenty of time for family and friends, including those of us lucky to be on his team with HPEP. He takes a captive interest in our lives and serves as a wealth of knowledge on everything from the latest sports championship to international affairs.

My time with Partakers served and will continue to serve as both a humbling and rewarding experience. I walk away from every conversation with Frantz realizing how lucky I am and how much reform our penal system needs. At the same time, I walk away with the feeling of love and support one experiences after time well spent with a close friend. Before I came to Harvard I had no knowledge of Partakers or the College Behind Bars program; one year later I find it difficult to imagine my life without the positive influence of either group. Unfortunately not many experience what Frantz and I have through both of these programs. There are few federally funded prison education programs left and fewer, if any, programs like Partakers. I can only hope that as many people as possible, from donors to mentors to mentees experience what I have through Partakers and HPEP and I look forward to many continued years with them.

All the best,

Rachel Marlena Stevens