



HOLD. THE. LINE.



The ACTT Newsletter

Issue 2 / Fall 2020

Purpose

The outside members of the Appalachian Community Think Tank (ACTT) felt rejuvenated and inspired by all the contributions in the ACTT Summer Newsletter. They decided to issue a Fall Newsletter of outside contributions.

Outside members request that inside members issue a Winter Newsletter if possible. We are happy to help.

Special Thanks

Thank you to the SCI-Fayette administration for approving this Think Tank. We are especially grateful for the support and guidance of Corrections School Principal Kimmel.

Announcements and Requests

Below are a list of requests and announcements by outside members:

1. Make the official title of the ACTT Newsletter series: “Hold. The. Line.” Let us know if you have other title ideas for the ACTT Newsletter.
2. We request that inside members issue the “Hold. The. Line.” Winter Newsletter to the best of their capabilities.
3. The Appalachian Prison Book Project (APBP) is in the process of creating a book in consultation the WVU Press about its work on sending books to incarcerated people. There will also be a section on the Inside-Out program. If you are okay with APBP potentially including your writing and artwork from our Justice and Literature class in its book, please fill out the permission form at the end of this Newsletter and return to APBP / Book of Letters and Art; PO Box 601; Morgantown WV 26507.
4. Justice 4 Who outside members request ACTT members to submit a short contribution for the developing Justice 4 Who website. This contribution might be a short essay on a topic related to justice or a review of a book related to justice, such as *The Meaning of Life*, or a poem about justice. The contribution should be no more than 500 words and sent to the APBP PO Box. We will only include first names, unless you ask to be anonymous.
5. APBP has many copies of Chris Wilson's book, *The Master Plan*. If Fayette could use more, send word.

“You are a light. You are the light. Never let anyone—any person or any force—dampen, dim or diminish your light. Study the path of others to make your way easier and more abundant. Lean toward the whispers of your own heart, discover the universal truth, and follow its dictates.” – John Lewis

ACTT Responses – Looking to the Future

In the Summer Newsletter, our moderator requested each member 1) identify one endeavor for ACTT to consider pursuing and 2) briefly explain their reason for participating in ACTT.

Emily

1) I really want ACTT to be able to do the associate's degree program because I think it is probably the most beneficial out of the projects we have. I know there was some uncertainty with the program though as we ended last semester, so if that is not an option anymore, Kenny's proposal for a reentry program sounds promising!

2) I want to continue to participate in ACTT because I think that the work we do is important to so many groups of people, even beyond ACTT members. We need to continue to facilitate programs that are beneficial to people on the inside and spread awareness about mass incarceration to people on the outside. I know that COVID-19 has hindered our progress, but I still think that we can do a lot of good despite our circumstances and I would like to continue to be a part of the positive influence ACTT can have on the SCI-Fayette community.

Ellen:

1) I'd like ACTT to continue the development of the Justice 4 Who website. I think it's feasible to develop this even with limited meetings and contact. It creates a platform for people to write and learn about the current criminal justice systems.

2) I participate in ACTT because I want to encourage a more empathetic world, which I believe starts with education and open conversation. From participating in our Inside-Out class, I think this group is uniquely suited for this mission.

katy:

1) I hope ACTT can continue to plan for a symposium on higher education. We could create a space for diverse stakeholders to learn from one another, share resources, and build something new and needed in southwestern PA. Norm put me in touch with Ken Parker, Chair of Catholic Studies at Duquesne and former director of the Prison Program at Saint Louis U. Ken is eager to collaborate.

2) Social transformation depends on people caring for one another. I miss all of you and feel the absence of our conversations every day, especially when trying to figure out how to create equitable educational spaces, in and out of prisons. In building a community, we are trying to find better ways to live -- "past survival, past isolation," as Mia Mingus puts it. Continuous connection.

Rayna:

1) I'd like to see the ACTT continue to change the conversation, with respect to all of the working projects, and impact the environment so folks that aren't a part of ACTT see something brighter manifest out of the context in which we all came together.

2) I participate in the ACTT because I believe that another world is possible, for all of us. There is no shortage of good that can come from working together to lift each other up. I am changed from the short moments we have had, and moved beyond belief, with hope that we will find a way to work through whatever the new normal looks like.

Mackenzie

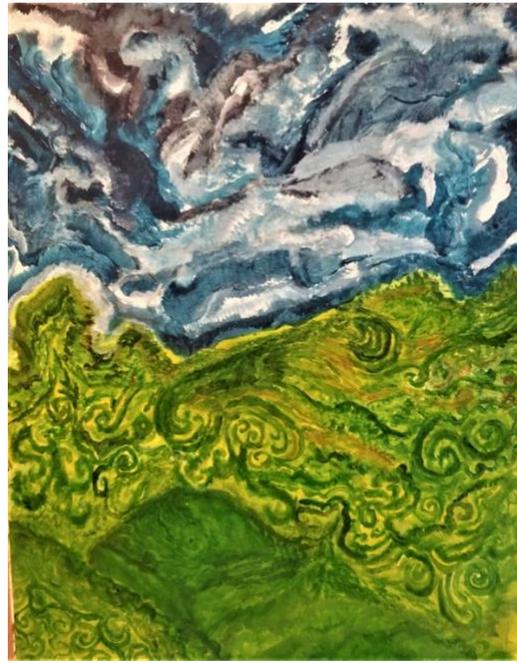
1) I think the podcast is something very attainable to work on during this time; it might even be more successful considering the increased amount of focus people are giving to virtual media.
2) I am doing an honors project on the impact of prison programming/prison reform. When I heard of this opportunity, I thought it would be a great way to get involved and learn more from my direct experiences. I love to meet new people and help the community in any way possible, so I have loved to be able to meet all the inside students and learn from them. I hope to do work regarding prison reform in the future, so the ACTT has greatly helped me prepare for that. I am also currently doing my senior Capstone on this as well.

Patrick

I decided to participate in ACTT because I believe that there is a possibility for real change to occur at SCI Fayette. The Inside-Out course taught me that change begins in small, planned and executed movements, not in one federal law. If we can make SCI Fayette better for incarcerated people, then we can also learn to improve conditions in prisons too.

Sophie

1) I would like to see the current projects be followed-through with if possible. I am open to possibilities.
2) I participate in ACTT because I believe in incarcerated people's worth as human beings and I want them to have voices and opportunities and everything else good. Since I have the opportunity to help with these projects, I'm honored to do it.



Painting by Sophie

Member Updates and *What are you reading and writing?*

Mackenzie:

I recently have been in the process of applying to law school! I have taken the LSAT twice now and am currently working on filling out my applications. The last few months have given me time to focus on my hobbies a bit more, so I have been painting, reading, and practicing my colorguard skills more often than usual. Other than that, I have returned to work and have been trying to keep track of my virtual school work.

Ellen:

I'm currently teaching five classes online for WVU and Stevenson University. On weekends, I volunteer for "get out the vote" campaigns in PA. I just finished reading *Stay and Fight* by Madeline ffitch (yes, that's how she spells her last name) and highly recommend it. Every day I think of ACTT and all that we've learned from each other. I even have dreams about it. I feel hopeful about the work to come.

Katy:

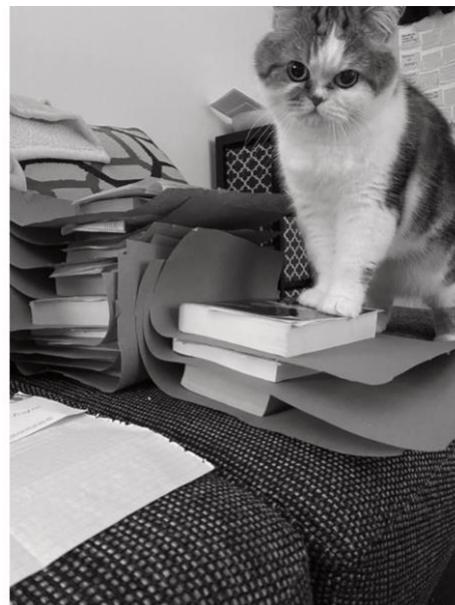
My friend Renaldo Hudson walked out of prison after 37 years. His life sentence commuted. Moon right where he left it. We read about his program "Building Blocks" in our IO class. Renaldo said he'd be happy to make a short video about the peer-mentoring and educational program if it might be of help to ACTT. I just read Dwayne Betts' book of poems *Felon*. So good. APBP will soon have 100 copies of the paperback Freedom Edition of *Felon*. I'll be moderating a zoom discussion with Dwayne Betts in November as part of a WVU Summit on mass incarceration. Rayna and I have told him all about ACTT.

Lydia:

Have you ever started reading a book and immediately realized that you will find yourself, sooner or later, going back to read it again someday? I've been reading *Good Omens* by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, and I already know that it is the first of many times I will read this story. I also like to memorize poetry; it's the most annoying thing about me. This month, I turn to Rebecca Elson's *Antidotes to Fear of Death*. I love how it starts: "Sometimes as an antidote / To fear of death, / I eat the stars." What does she mean, to eat the stars? To love something so intensely that you consume it? Otherwise, I'm preparing for cold weather. I brought my plants indoors this week, and it's so nice to be surrounded by green. My favorite is one I call a purple shamrock—its leaves are a stunning, bright violet, and they reach toward the sun, even leaning out of their pot to best find the light. It reminds me to look at the sky, too. As I build the Justice 4 Who website, I'm thinking of you all.

Patrick:

Life is strange right now, as I assume it is for many. Although most of my classes are online, I still go into work 2 days per week. I'm the graduate assistant for the student produced public affairs show, Morgantown Today and I'm also the Digital Managing Editor at The Daily Athenaeum, the school newspaper. For my master's project, I think I am going to create a podcast series analyzing the policies that lead to West Virginia having one of the highest rates of incarcerated women in the world (more to come on this). I'm taking an English course studying Ralph Ellison and his influences. I just read Ellison's essay, "What America Would be Like Without Blacks" and it was disheartening to see so many similarities from his writing in the 1970s to today. I am reading Ellison's *Invisible Man* concurrently with Toni Morrison's *Sula*. I miss you all. I'm praying that one of these days we can be in the same space, using our brains to make change.



Toulouse, The APBP cat

Emily:

First, I want to say that I hope everyone is as safe and healthy as possible given our circumstances. As for personal updates, I'm starting my last year at WVU and I just started a new job as a tutor for WVU's writing studio. I've been working at the studio since the beginning of September and my first appointment is finally scheduled for the 21st, so I'm really looking forward to that! I also took the LSAT last month and should get my score back any day now. It was my first time taking the test, so I'm hoping for the best! I hope everyone is doing well, it has been very strange to be so disconnected from everyone on the inside this semester.

Kate:

First off, I want to say how much I miss everyone & our class. Being in law school at William & Mary has really been a challenging, but rewarding experience. I have read more in the past few weeks than my entire life combined. I feel like Craig with how much reading I'm doing lol! On a positive note, I have met some really outstanding students and professors who are so passionate about criminal justice and reform that it makes me happy to think that there are people out there talking about concepts we talked about in class and who do want to make a difference. It's really encouraging and refreshing. I wish you all well and hope everything is going ok. Miss you all!

Sophie:

What's going on in your life that you'd like to share? I'm set to hopefully graduate wvu this december. thinking about you guys all the time, hope everyone and their family is okay and virus-free.

Jordan:

Since you heard from me last, I secured full-time employment at New South Media. I have written well over 50 articles across four publications: *Morgantown, WV Living, WV Weddings, and Wonderful West Virginia*. When I feel like I can't keep up, I remember my friends at Fayette, their ambition, determination, and hard work. When I feel like I'm not brave enough, I remember the strength and courage they continue to give me. Words can't describe the magic that happened in that classroom, but I search for them every day. Take good care. Until we meet again.

Rayna:

I've been re-learning the piano (digital), teaching myself by ear. Some classical (Pachelbel's Canon), Alicia Keys, and others that move me to pause. In all that's going on in this world (and has been), it's been a source of release and hope; I've been staying in contact with Ann Pancake, and she's asked me to be one of the featured emerging Affrilachian poets for a virtual reading at WVU. I'm looking forward to it; I miss your incredible minds and souls, the community, and all that I learn from each of you.

"We fight back with solidarity and mobilization protesting at your offices your buildings your stations marching down your streets as you trap us on bridges and still we hold strong because we are persistent.

And we kneel on the fields in the stands in the prisons and we hold up our fists clenched and insistent...

This movement is moving, and I am a witness. And it's time that we reckon; instead of lean in, just listen."

-excerpt from Rayna's latest poem entitled "Until We Reckon"

“The longing inside of us for large-scale change is very real and important, especially in the face of so much fear and unbelievable violence against the most vulnerable members of our communities. Sometimes I think about it as an ecosystem. If you’ve never seen the desert, you might think there is little to no life amidst the dry sand and rocks. But to those who live there, they have learned to recognize all the different kinds of life that exist. They have learned to not only wait for the occasional rain to fall from the sky, but to find water in many different forms—forms that are not always recognizable to others. This is how I think about small victories in this work. The longer you are part of the work, the more you begin to understand that the downpours that soak through the ground are glorious, but there are also many more examples of life to be found.” –Mia Mingus

Thank you. We miss you all and hope to hear from you soon. –ACTT Outside

APBP Book Permission Form Below

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Appalachian Prison Book Project
c/o Book of Art and Letters Project
PO Box 601
Morgantown, WV 26507
appalachianpbp@gmail.com

Permission Form

I, _____, **[print name]**, give permission to the Appalachian Prison Book Project to include my previously submitted work or enclosed letter/artwork/writing, in full or in part, in a book of letters and artwork. Please refer to me in the book by **[circle your preference]**

- first name only
- first and last name
- a pseudonym _____

Please sign and date on this line