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## 'Writing Beyond the Prison' for Survive and Thrive: A Note by co-editor David Beard

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## **‘Writing Beyond the Prison’ for *Survive and Thrive***

A Note by co-editor David Beard

This special issue of *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine* includes writing from the “Writing Beyond the Prison” project.

The tradition of valuing writing (and the teaching of writing) among the incarcerated is long within *Survive and Thrive*. Our founder, the late Rex Veeder, was always immensely proud of the work he did in teaching in prisons. One of Veeder’s students, Jimmy Baca, wrote in honor of Veeder as his teacher while incarcerated, in “What Is Broken Is What God Blesses” and in “What’s Real and What’s Not” in earlier issues of this journal. Avesa Rockwell, in turn, wrote about her experiences with Veeder and Baca in “A Tributary, to Poetry and its Teachers.” Prison writing has a place in rehabilitation, in restorative justice, in reflection, and in *Survive and Thrive*.

Our values are shared by the creators of “Writing Beyond the Prison: Reimagining the Carceral Ecosystem with Incarcerated Authors.”

This public humanities project emerged from collaboration between the Humanities Institute at Stony Brook and two grassroots organizations all of which share a belief in the power of the written word to transform minds, lives, and the world. Team members include: Erika Duncan, Founder and creative Director of Herstory Writers Network; Ivan Kilgore, incarcerated writer, activist and Founder of the United Black Family Scholarship Foundation; Stony Brook University faculty members Robert Chase (Department of History), Zebulon Miletsky (Department of Africana Studies), and Susan Scheckel (Department of English); and a team of Stony Brook graduate and undergraduate students from four different departments.

“What we’re trying to do with this project is to amplify the voices of people impacted by incarceration, to bring them into the conversation as we study, research and teach about topics related to incarceration in the US,” Scheckel said. “These powerful writings can create an emotional connection to the subject, convey a sense of urgency, increase empathy, and deepen our understanding of complex social issues.”

The writings in this special issue, then, are selections from the “Writing Beyond the Prison” project. They have been written by incarcerated people, and as such, they have not been subject to the double-anonymous peer review process typical of *Survive and Thrive*. As a result, these writings represent the perspective of the incarcerated on their own experience.

Readers may want to read carefully, understanding that there are many complex and triggering topics discussed in these poems and essays. The risk, we hope, is worth it. Attending to these voices is real and significant and important work. As Rex Veeder said,

If you do this work,

you will be tested  
by everyone you count on  
and they will be right to test you  
you will become a storyteller  
and the listener of stories  
with your whole body and being  
you will be on fire  
and hold a bucket of water yourself  
since others will be either too frightened or transfixed  
to save you.

The voices you will hear in this special issue invite you to become, as Veeder said, “a storyteller and the listener of stories.” Perhaps, as a result of these stories, you might become “on fire,” yourself, and feel called to go into the world and listen to more stories from voices we do not hear.

If you do, we invite you to share them with the readership of *Survive and Thrive*.

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Thanks to Robert Chase, Zebulon Miletsky, and Susan Scheckel for the content in this special issue of *Survive and Thrive*. Thanks to Laura Thro, who suggested this theme for this issue, and to co-editor Julia Brown for connecting *Se&T* to the SUNY projects.

Because our publishing system requires a working email address for every submission (for author contact), Susan Scheckel is listed as a co-author on each submission. Nonetheless, Scheckel’s email address serves only to facilitate contact with each author within the *Survive and Thrive* publishing system, and for that, we are grateful.

If you would like to propose a special issue of *Survive and Thrive*, reach out to the editors.