

2024

Call for Reformation

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Recommended Citation

Burnett, Chanelle, "Call for Reformation" (2024). *Writing Beyond the Prison*. 75.
<https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/writingbeyondtheprison/75>

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Social Justice Autobiography

I, Chanel R. Burnett, #1188812, did not grow up during the days of Jim Crow, Malcolm X, and Dr. Martin Luther King. I grew up unaware of racial injustice.

I was raised in church — a small one, but filled with lots of love among the congregation. It would also serve as the place where my parents married.

After church on most Sundays, my mom, brother and I would go visit another church family with kids our ages and as our mothers talked, we played. They had a cool shed in the backyard and we'd go play what we termed "Adventure," out in the shed. There were lots of neat things in that shed.

Things were pretty normal in my household. I remember living in two different apartments as a child

before moving to the first home my parents purchased. My favorite place to go as a young girl though, was to my Granny's house. She was my absolute best friend and allowed me to get away with anything, not that I did much.

I was too young to know that "Granny's house" was leased by the Housing Authority and that it was a rent-controlled apartment. It was only when I was older and had my first child that I realized that the address I still remember to my "Granny's house" was one where the rent was based on your income. It was the same type of apartment I got for myself and my firstborn young king, my oldest son. It's fascinating the realizations we come to as we mature.

Upon reaching maturity, we see things for what they truly are. I saw then a system of poverty. I saw my peers on the street corners hustling for fast money.

Money that would land them in the one or two places my dad said all drug dealers would go: jail or the grave.

I fell in love with one and had my second Young King. Although we lived "hood-rich" in my little apartment, we had our fair share of relationship problems. Eventually, one event led to another and I found myself behind bars. Behind bars fighting against a broken system. A system which constantly reminds me that I am a Black woman incarcerated in the United States of America.

Housed in a structure designed for "reformation and rehabilitation," but the only ones receiving such are those of us who do it for ourselves, sadly. So I continue to educate myself in an effort to not only assist my peers trapped on the inside, but also to teach my Young Kings how they can rise above the status quo and achieve the greatness they are destined for.

— Charneel Burnett
Charneel Burnett