

REFLECTIONS ON FREE MINDS

In the Beginning by Evan Carton

Four years before it had students, faculty, or a name, Free Minds started with a cold call. In the spring of 2002, I answered my phone in the UT English Department and was greeted by a young woman who was thinking of coming to UT for graduate school but wanted to know, first, whether I might need an assistant, a collaborator in developing the community programs of the new Humanities Institute that I had founded a few months earlier. Sylvia Gale, as she introduced herself, saw a Ph.D. in English not as a credential to teach within the university's walls but as an opportunity to use the humanities to break those walls down. Did I share her vision?

She began as the Institute's program coordinator a year later. Our goal was to create a space where scholars and community members could engage one another by exploring the meanings and challenges of human life. Free Minds was one of many creative programs that brought academics and community together and had been Sylvia's dream from the start.

Sylvia, tonight's keynote speaker, was the first director of Free Minds. I taught its literature unit for the first two years and encountered the earliest of ten amazing cohorts which have enriched and elevated the lives of their professors as much as they were enriched and empowered by us. What's the secret of Free Minds? Kellee Coleman ('08), now a college graduate and Foundation Communities Board member, sums it up: "As Socrates says to Glaucon when discussing the Allegory of the Cave, 'the power and capacity of learning exists in the soul already.'" That soul just needs an inviting space, free books, some encouragement—and maybe some childcare.

At 10 by Vivé Griffith

One of the first things I tell students at every orientation is that we are embarking together on a journey. For nine months we will walk, sit, read, write, debate, question, and learn with each other. (Oh, and eat too!) And when that journey is over, every one of us will be changed. As we mark ten years of Free Minds, it's useful to think of the journey the program has been on and how it too has changed.

Free Minds began with the bold vision of the Humanities Institute, then was fostered in the UT Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, and moved in 2013 to become a program of Foundation Communities, an organization dedicated to helping people get the education and support they need to build better lives.

Along the way we held classes in learning centers, libraries, a high school cafeteria, and in the brand new M Station community space. We've added alumni classes, writing workshops, 2nd Saturdays, and reunion picnics. AmeriCorps volunteers and the fabulous Amelia Pace-Borah joined the staff. Two dozen professors and hundreds of volunteers brought their expertise to our classroom. We celebrated with our Clemente Course peers when President Obama awarded the National Humanities Medal to our programs in 2014.

Some things have remained constant: support from our partners, a clear sense of community, a focus on texts and ideas that have shaped human thinking. In the colorful Free Minds office is a bookcase loaded with Shakespeare and Sherman Alexie, Frederick Douglass and Sandra Cisneros, Plato and Virginia Woolf. They have been our companions on the road, as have more than a hundred graduates whose photos grace our walls and whose stories you can read in the pages that follow. Thank you for being part of our journey.