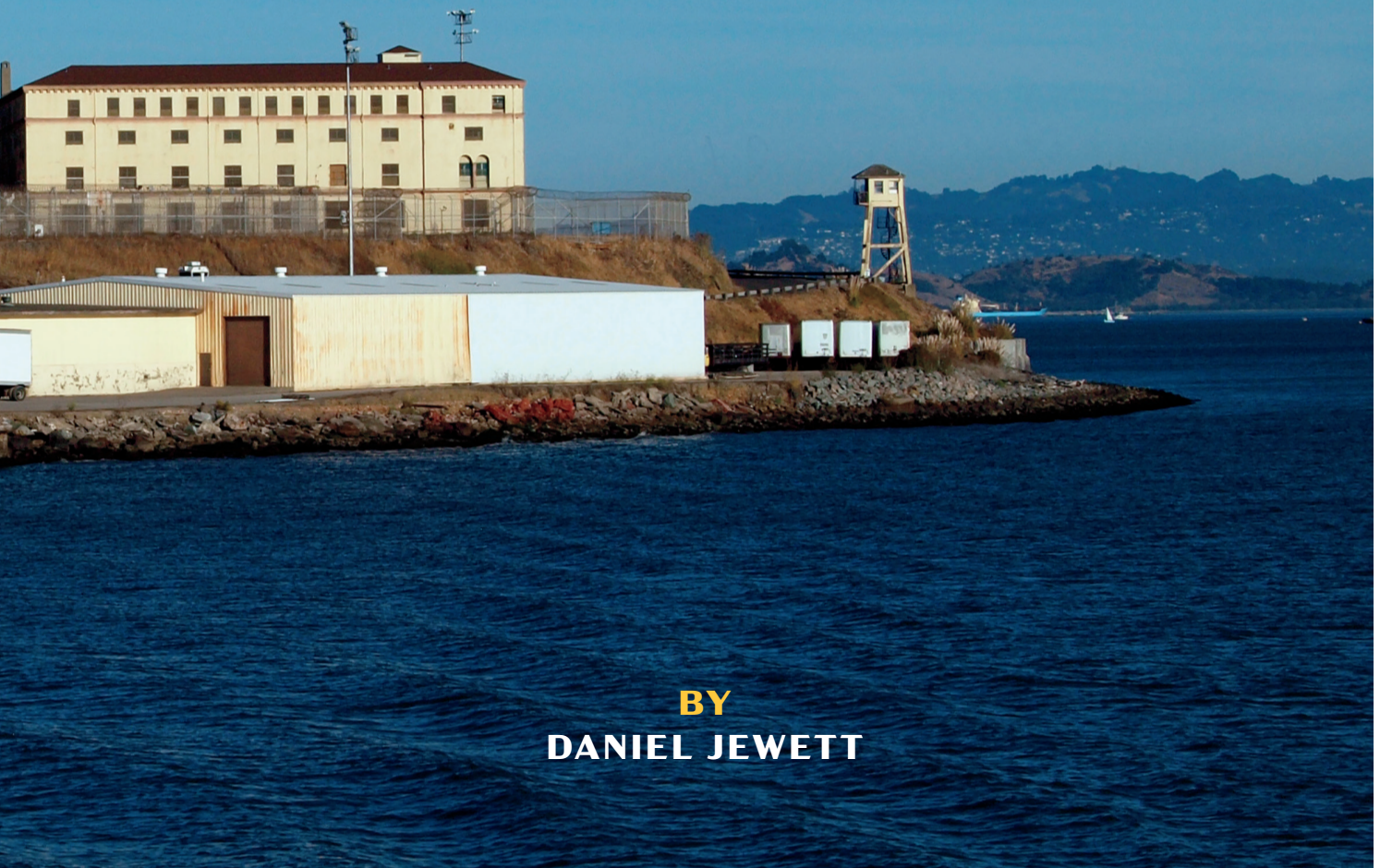






# FACING LIFE

Sentenced to a lifetime behind bars,  
**RAHSAAN “NEW YORK” THOMAS**  
became a journalist, won his freedom  
and now uses writing to help other  
incarcerated people unlock their futures.



**BY**  
**DANIEL JEWETT**

**A**lthough Brownsville, a neighborhood of color in Brooklyn punctuated by housing project towers, was an afterthought to city officials, Rahsaan Thomas mostly felt safe growing up — at least until the cops came around.

"I remember Brownsville was a good neighborhood when I was young, even though we were broke. Everybody left their doors open," says the half-Black, half-Puerto Rican with a steely gaze balanced by an easy laugh and a natural intelligence. "Then crack hit and all of the sudden we've got extra locks on the door."

Despite difficulties including a father who was never around, being bullied for looking white and seeing his brother get shot, Thomas was a hard worker with gigs at Sprint Messenger Service, G & G Shops and a law firm. Even though he was working and not involved in criminal activity he still felt the need to carry a gun for safety, which led to a stint in prison for assault with a deadly weapon. After that everything changed.

"Once I came up with that felony I couldn't get back in," he says — he was relegated to working odd jobs while supporting two kids, finding career opportunities closed to him. "At first I was doing really good and trying really hard, but the system kept picking on me."

Eventually Thomas found himself in California, dealing weed, when the event that would shape his life in unexpected ways happened. A drug deal went bad when some buyers refused to pay and Thomas shot at them, killing one man and injuring another. "A robbery meant you were taking my self-esteem and taking my pride, my self-image," he says. "I made the horrible choice of deciding that a bag of marijuana and my pride were

more important than my life." He was sentenced to 55 years and six months to life in San Quentin Rehabilitation Center, known then as San Quentin State Prison.

Thomas did some research on his father and learned that he was in prison for eight years, was addicted to heroin and had committed suicide. "I was like this dude is a loser and I never want to be like him," he says, adding that it is easy to give up on improving yourself when you are facing life behind bars. "I just kept thinking, I gotta do something to make sure my life means something to my sons, even if I'm never going home."

Thomas decided to become a writer and started reading books on the *New York Times* bestseller list and joining every program he could at San Quentin: a creative writing class, a poetry class, college classes on English and journalism, instruction from a guild that teaches journalism. "San Quentin was the opposite of any prison I've ever been in," he says about the opportunities. But in the process, he discovered one painful truth: the 250,000-word epic tome he had spent 10 years working on wasn't very good. "I find out this book is horrible, I made every possible mistake," he says, laughing.

"In the San Quentin creative writing class I learned how to write and that I could write, and I wrote a story called 'One Bad Apple,'" Thomas says. "It was the first story I ever read in public and they loved it." Thomas began writing for the *San Quentin News*, becoming its sports editor, which guaranteed him at least six to 10 stories per issue (he would





From left: Miye Sugino, Rahsaan Thomas, Christine Lashaw, Emily Nonko and Dejon Joy outside of San Quentin after the Artist Initiative/ Empowerment Avenue Art Expo inside the prison.







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go on to write more than 300 articles in total). “Sometimes I felt like I was writing the whole paper,” he jokes.

But with his \$36 a month salary (most of which went to victim restitution), Thomas began noticing something else. “I realized that this prison that was letting me learn how to be a podcaster, a writer and a filmmaker was not allowing me to make money,” he says. “I was a 40-year-old man asking my mommy for stuff. I couldn’t take care of my kids.”

With the goal of helping other writers and journalists behind bars find a path to getting paid for their work, Thomas created Empowerment Avenue ([www.empowermentave.org](http://www.empowermentave.org)). He also began making documentary films and — in a move that would take on greater significance later — joined season four of the prison-life *Ear Hustle* podcast ([www.earhustlesq.com](http://www.earhustlesq.com)), which was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2020.

“I was covering their stories for the newspaper and just really admiring their progress and one day NBC came and took a picture of us together. And that picture kept popping up as if I was part of it,” Thomas says about *Ear Hustle*, adding that later he did become a part of it. “Co-host Earlonne (Woods) was getting a commutation and he was going to be going home hella early. So they wanted to have a new ‘inside’ producer and they did auditions and I got it.”

The photo proved to be a blessing in disguise as it made Thomas well-known and, with the focused effort on rehabilitation and his other work behind bars, set him up as a strong candidate for commutation himself. “What comes into play is that unless the governor thinks it’s safe to let you go and the public wants you back you aren’t getting out early,” says Thomas, who submitted a

commutation packet to Governor Gavin Newsom. “Most people have nobody at their hearing, but I had like 50 people show up.” Newsom granted the commutation and one agonizing year later, last February, Thomas found himself a free man once again. “It was a beautiful feeling,” he says.

Now Thomas, based in Oakland, is working full time with several partners on Empowerment Avenue — helping journalists on the inside write and edit stories, build industry connections, make pitches to publications like the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Miami Herald*, *The Appeal* and *Marshall Project*, and get paid. “We have some really prolific writers like Chris Blackwell, who has published over 100 stories since he’s been in the program,” Thomas says, adding that the program is in 14 prisons in 20 states and has brought in some \$250,000 for incarcerated writers. “We have four volunteers and his wife working with him, he’s got a podcast, a book thing, he’s poppin’.”

In 2023 Empowerment Avenue was awarded a J.M.K. Innovation Prize, which supports innovators in the fields of social justice, the environment and heritage conservation. Awardees receive a total of \$175,000 over three years as well as help navigating the challenges of running a startup. Thomas says he will use the prize money to hire another staff member, grow the writing program and expand into film.

Thomas believes that one of the most important things he does is help people reintegrate into society with a solid foundation to stand on — financially and emotionally — and that that benefits everybody. “You’re not used to interacting with regular people and having a normal social dynamic. When you isolate people, when you reject them, they feel like f\*ck the world,” he says. “But when you include them, they shift their loyalty to society. It’s easy to switch allegiances if you let people in.”