



Nate Johnson, JD, is the Founder and Executive Director of FreeWriters, a non-profit organization serving inmates in Hennepin County, Minnesota. Prior to founding FreeWriters, Nate served as a prosecuting attorney and a mentor to a highly gifted young man named Joe. Joe was a county drug court participant and the victim of an extremely traumatic childhood. Nate and Joe bonded very quickly and they remain close today.

In early 2019, Nate left his prosecutor job and elected to participate in a writing workshop at the Loft Literary Center. While at the Loft, Nate learned about “free-writing” — prompt-based, timed, spontaneous writing followed by reading aloud — and found in free-writing a great tool for self-reflection and stress relief. Around that time, Joe violated probation and received a 60-day jail sanction. While visiting Joe in the county jail, Nate learned disturbing things about Joe’s environment: no outdoor time or space for inmates, no windows, and no classroom programming besides occasional bible and 12-step meetings.

Concerned for Joe’s mental health, Nate taught him the free-writing method. Joe took to it immediately. Joe made a habit of free-writing during difficult moments in jail — and the writing helped. Near the end of Joe’s sentence, Nate asked if other inmates would like free-writing. Joe said he was sure they would. Nate pitched the Hennepin County Sheriff’s Office about his leading free-writing groups in the downtown Minneapolis jail. The classes were an instant success with inmate-students, and since fall of 2019, FreeWriters has held classes for 500+ inmates who have written and performed 1500+ pieces of writing.