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INTERVIEW

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Veronza Bowers, Jr.
Let One Hundred Mandelas Bloom



Eda Levenson
YouthSpeaksOut
Who Needs Prisons, Who Do the Prisons Need?

Christy Wagner
Wireless-Free Sanctuary



Courage & Cruelty in Freshwater Lodgepole & Annapurna
The forest pirates of Poseidon



LET ONE HUNDRED MANDELAS BLOOM

YouthSpeaksOut



photo by Dan Roberts ©2002

Who Needs Prisons, And Who Do the Prisons Need? part 2

VERONZA BOWERS

produced by Dan Roberts & Eda Levenson
broadcast on KZYX/Z, Philo CA
12/29/02

EDA LEVENSON: I'm currently a freshman at UC Santa Cruz. For four years I have been in contact with a man who has spent the last thirty-two years of his life in prison. His name is Veronza Bowers, Jr. Before his incarceration, he was a member of the Black Panther Party during the Sixties. At twenty-six years old he was convicted of the murder of a Park Ranger—although the legitimacy of his trial is questionable, due to the lack of physical evidence and the reliability of the key witnesses. To this day, Veronza claims his innocence, and that the FBI framed him. He is currently being held in a federal penitentiary in Coleman, Florida. Last June, my family and I visited Veronza. This is the first time that any of us, including my father, who has known him for fifteen years, has seen Veronza in person. During our visit I brought up the idea of doing a telephone interview. After months of negotiation, and being denied once by the assistant warden of the prison, I was finally granted permission to interview Veronza over the phone. On September 11th of 2002, I conducted the interview.

Because of his circumstances we could only talk in fifteen minute segments, with fifteen minute breaks in between each one. If you would like more information about Veronza Bowers, Jr. or an update on his current case, please log onto www.geocities.com/veronzab. If you would like to contact me, please email me at eda@pacific.net

September 11, 2002

This call is from a federal prison. This is a pre-paid call . . . This call is from . . . Veronza

VERONZA BOWERS, Jr.: First, I want to thank you, Eda, and Dan, and everyone at the radio station KZYX and all your listeners. This is such a great opportunity, because I recognize the fact that I don't exist in a vacuum, and at the same time, I understand that it is a tremendous responsibility because people listen to what people say sometime and our voices have been silent for a long, long time.




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So this is great opportunity, and I really do appreciate this opportunity, and I'll try to let it flow.

Secondly, you might hear a lot of noise in the background. But it's not really noise: it's other human beings, just like I'm situated, and they are getting ready to go and eat, and it might sound like feeding time at the Serengeti Plains.

Eda: *I'm going to ask you to talk a bit about your personal background—where you grew up and went to school.*

VERONZA: I've given some thought about my childhood growing up. One thing about prison: it gives you an opportunity if you take it, an opportunity to do a lot of reflecting upon your past.

I grew up in a little town in Oklahoma named McAlester—that's where they have a big penitentiary—I grew up in a very, very small, tight-knit community, at a time when things were a lot different. And reflecting on that, I grew up primarily with the influence of women. Because my father was away in the Army. My father, Veronza, he did a twenty-five years in the U.S. Army. So my mother, Dorothy . . .

I'm glad you asked this question because in order to understand anything, you have to look at it in its totality, it's connections—it's historical connections, if you will. And growing up in this little town, surrounded by women as I was—because my grandmother had six children: five of them were women, and one son (we called him 'Uncle Sonny') and so, the little neighborhood that I grew up in, all black neighborhood, we didn't have any experience with racism directly.

Or even with all the conflicts that result from that.

Looking back on it, you think about poverty and being poor and all of those things: but back then, it was just always a very very good feeling. My great grandmother, Granny, she was my first real teacher of *our* story (it's called "history.") She was seven years old when slavery was abolished. She taught me a lot of things about that past. So my youth was very rich in tradition and stories. And I remember my grandmother (everybody called her 'Bucker', but I called her 'Grandma.') She was like the backbone of the Johnson/Larkins clan. And her word was law.

**Growing up as a little boy like that,
I learned to really listen to
and appreciate the old people
and what they had to say.**

**Because they always were talking
about "Life"—you know.
That was a great joy for me**

to be able to sit around and listen to all those kinds of things.

And Mama was always 'Mama'. With my father being away all the time, she gave so much strength and understanding of the world around me.

So, growing up in McAlester, Oklahoma—I was born in 1946.

[the sound of many men in the background grows louder] . . . Eda, listen to this: you hear them call chow? It will get quiet in a minute so I won't have to speak so loud and so fast, maybe. . . I've really come to the realization that when you start talking about the past, there's so much that happened, so many memorable experiences that you could wander on and on and on.

Eda: *Would you talk a little bit about what it was like to be segregated and discriminated against.*

VERONZA: Eda, I never understood what segregation meant and what racism meant, and I never heard the word 'nigger' because, as I say, I grew up in a black community where there was a lot of love and concern about each other.

I went to a little small school, named L'Ouverture High—but it was for from the first to the twelfth grade. We had to catch a bus and cross a little canal to hop on the bus to go way, way across town. And there was a little school right up the street about two and a half blocks on a dirt road: it was a very nice red brick school. I come to find out later, it was a grade school to jr. high. That's where white people went to school. And I used to walk past it sometime and look at it and wonder: *What kind of teaching goes on in there that's so much different?*

Later on in life I found out L'Ouverture High was named after Toussaint L'Ouverture, the great liberator down there in Haiti. They'd never taught us anything about that.

But that little town, as small as it was, we thought it was normal. Like when we wanted to go to the movie theater.

Back then you paid five or ten cents to go to the theater. They had three movie theaters in the whole town: the News, the Chief, and the Okla. The News was the one where we could go to. I always wondered why we couldn't go to the other ones, but I didn't ever question that. And when we did go, we had to sit up in the balcony; and it was only on Saturday or Sunday that we could go.

**One time they had this movie called
The Ten Commandments
—I remember just like I'm looking at it.
They closed the theater and let
all the black communities in.**

Third ward, Fourth ward and Fifth ward (our communities were called 'wards'.) That was for two weeks.

**And once that was over and they
figured everybody had seen
The Ten Commandments that were
going to see it, they closed the movie
theater down for another two weeks
and fumigated the place,
because we had been there.**

Those experiences as a little boy: I would look at them then and wondering what all this was about. They still had the water fountains with signs: one water fountain said 'Colored' and the other

water fountain said 'White'.

I remember on a sunny day, my father picked me up (because I'm too small to step on the water pedal and drink at the same time) so he picked me up and the water is coming up, and I look over at the other water fountain—I could read too, by then—and at the other water fountain a little white boy's father had him picked up.

I'm looking at this water, and the water is sparkling because the sun is shining through the window, and when my father set me down I said, "Daddy, how come my water says 'Colored' and the other water says 'White' and they look both the same?"

And I remember my father lifting me and he said, "Boy, you'll understand those things later on in life."

Those are the kind of little experiences, the accumulation of which, along with the lessons of my grandmother, that leads a little young mind like I had into questioning a lot of things that you see around you.

Eda: *At what point did you become aware that because you were black you were being treated differently, and when did you realize you wanted to make a difference, and you wanted that to stop?*

VERONZA: You know, Eda, I don't think it was a particular point. It was just an accumulation of my experiences growing up, particularly in McAlester Oklahoma, and then later on in Omaha, Nebraska. I think it was just the accumulation, starting back from my real education by my great grandmother, and then watching the women with the Welfare and all of that kind of stuff going on in the neighborhood.

Then one day they came up with the desegregation of schools (I think that was 1954, with the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision by the Supreme Court) and I starting going to that little school two and a half blocks up the way, and that's when I was called (to my knowledge) 'nigger' for the first time.

Those kinds of things growing up. Becoming part of a wrestling team and going away to college. Being in the military, the US Navy for a short stint and going overseas in the Mediterranean. And along about that time (by then I guess I'm about twenty years old or so), Brother Malcolm X came on the scene with the Nation of Islam and that whole movement toward recognizing what they called 'Negroes' at that time, as black people, people of African descent—that we were actually somebody. That we were human beings and not just the doormat of the world.

And just listening—because I've always been a listener. I was raised that way: to listen to the old people, to listen to adults when they talk. And I took that listening and listened to a lot of things. And not just listened with my ears, but with my heart and feeling. And as I grew up and started looking around me, and I see what is considered poverty everywhere and that it is such a pervasive thing. Then going overseas and seeing how people live differently; coming back and seeing how we still are at the bottom of the pecking order, so to speak—the doormat of the world—and then hearing people like Malcolm talk about (and even the Honorable Elijah Mohammed) talk about "do for self, and pride in your own self."

And then the pride I was given by my grandmother, Buckler. You know, Eda, if I could, I would like to just give you a little idea through a poem that I wrote to my grandmother. She died in 1983. I used to write a lot of poetry and I wasn't allowed to go to the funeral. So I wrote this poem and sent it to my sister and asked her to read the poem—'To Grandma,' that's the name of it—and place it on her chest, place it over her heart. I haven't written any poetry since. The poem goes like this:

Grandma, the silence of your heart brings pain to all
who love you
Could I say goodbye to you in tears, I would
But somehow I know you would only smile and say
"Boy, wipe your eyes. I'm free at last. I'm free at last
Thank God, Almighty, I'm free at last."
So, Grandma, I'll remember you in your strength
You taught me to stand tall with pride and dignity
Although I live in shadow
At this moment in time

Grant me but the memory of you
Your face, your smile
In darkness then I live without fear
Lost though I may be for awhile
Wonderful memories of you sustain me
And I know the meaning of hope
Reflections of you spring from my heart
To liberate me from the chains of men

Grandma, could I say goodbye to you in tears I would
But never can I say goodbye to all that you were
To all that you gave me
Grandma, may you rest in peace

And you know, I wrote that to say that not just Grandma, but the people of the community. You've got to have a real appreciation for the strength of a people who were able to withstand the discrimination, the exploitation, the oppression—that life—and still be able to love each other and hope for a better day.

**I learned listening to people like Malcolm,
and to my own heart,
that not only should you hope for a better day,
but you also have to struggle for it.**

**So at one point in my life
when I heard about the Black Panther Party
being formed out in Oakland, California;
and I read their platform and program,
I said to myself: Man, maybe here we can do
something to better the condition of our people.**

And then "Our People" expanded to be people who were . . .
This call is from a federal prison . . . living in a bad way. And so, I joined the Black Panther Party.

Eda: *What did the Black Panther Party offer you? And what did you want to accomplish by getting involved?*

VERONZA: The Black Panther Party became a nation-wide organization and we established chapters for the state and branches in the city all across the country where there were major (what people called) "ghettos". We began to address some of the issues of our communities—the same ones that I'd seen growing up as a little boy.

Hunger. We established programs like free breakfasts for school children—programs for any child that wanted to eat a healthy meal before they went to school. They could stop by at any of the places where we had that established, and have a good, healthy and wholesome breakfast.

**Because it's a hard thing to sit in school, trying to
learn, and your stomach is growling,
and you hear more of your stomach
than you do the teacher.**

So those kinds of issues.

Or, like the old ladies would be going to the store and a youngster would come by and snatch her pocketbook: we addressed those kind of issues. Even recruited some of those little youngsters to escort the ladies to the store and not be worried about being molested.

**Those types of positive programs in the community
—doing for self—became like a vehicle.
And I was just one of the many young men
and women who were filled with a vision
and a burning desire and a hope
and a dream for a better future for our people.
And so, we embarked upon that journey,
not knowing where it would end. Or if it would end.
But we knew we had to do something.**

—Not to mention the police brutality that was raging from coast to coast—and still is from coast to coast. We began to wrestle a lot of those issues, and unfortunately (and history will bear it out) we were misaligned and attacked.

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And my incarceration is a direct result of that. Not because of something I have done, but because of my (what they call or what is called) "political activity".

So that makes me one of the long-held political prisoners in this country. And I am just one of many.

—And it is hard for me to just speak about myself. But because of the nature of this interview, I know that's necessary. But I can't be understood apart from a People and a Movement.

Because in reality, as a political prisoner—and that's known throughout the world: that we were representatives of a people and we were accused of trying to overthrow the government and all kinds of foolishness. Because that was never the case. We were trying to make a better life for our own people. And for that—history will also absolve us on this—a war was declared against us, and many of us linger in prison now. For decades. I'm almost in my thirtieth year, and I'm still struggling.

Eda: *Would you talk about what happened during your original case. What happened during that time and how old you were when you were convicted.*

VERONZA: I had never really been in trouble with the law, other than selling Black Panther newspapers and a lot of little miscellaneous charges they were using to try to disrupt the flow of activity.

So, I was twenty-six when I got convicted of first degree murder of a National Parks Service ranger. It was a very strange thing, because not ever having to have an experience with the law and justice and all that kind of stuff, sitting there in the courtroom, clearly things were running pretty ragged. —And I had some very good defense lawyers, and I could see they were doing their best, but I also could see that apparently the deck was stacked.

I'm going to try to make it real brief and straight to the point: they had two main witnesses: one guy that I knew well (and I knew his brother even better) and another guy I had never met, although I knew his brother. The first guy, the main witness, testified that on the night of this killing that I was with him—which was a lie. And that I was the trigger man—which was a lie. And in exchange for his lie, and his testimony (he had already been convicted of an unrelated bank robbery and had received twelve years) he wound up doing two years at some camp and received \$10,000 for his testimony.

The other witness—who I had never laid eyes on in my life—he had three cases pending in court for Possession, for Sale and Distribution of heroin. And in exchange for his testimony against me (he corroborated the main witness's testimony—with another lie—by saying that I came and told him everything that happened.) In exchange for that lie, the State's cases for possession and sale of heroin were dismissed and he received \$10,000. Plus, we had a 1973 Grand Prix that was taken, and it was awarded to him. He was rewarded with our own Grand Prix for his duplicity.

Those two testimonies, with no physical evidence, sealed my fate. And I've languished in prison ever since, unable to unravel that strange web that was weaved.

Weaved at a time in history, Eda, when (as it is generally known, now) there was a program called CO-INTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program) that was designed to disrupt and neutralize the Black Liberation Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the American Indian Movement. Many of us were victims of that program set up by J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. And the web was spun so tight, that we haven't been able to unravel it except in a couple of cases like Geronimo Pratt out in California. After twenty-seven years, they finally proved it was a wrong conviction and he was released after twenty-seven years and awarded something like four and a half million dollars. That amounts to about fifty dollars a day for your life, and that is not a fair exchange.

And there was one other brother out of the Panther Party named Dhroba Moore. After nineteen years of wrongful conviction by the state of New York, he was awarded some-odd millions of dollars. But that is in exchange for a life, and our lives are just as precious as anybody else's. We are political prisoners, and there are many others that are still lingering in prison in New York state and California and Maryland, and Mumia up there on Death Row in Pennsylvania. Leonard Peltier over there in Leavenworth. And we just continue to try to do the best we can. To try to live and do the best we can.

My case has so many clouds on it, and it's been through many procedures; but it

can summed up pretty quickly this way:

I was arrested on state charges—a number of them and they were all dismissed, not only because of the Search Warrant. —The judge ruled the Search Warrant was illegal, because there was no Probable Cause or anything. Back in those days there was a lot of fishing expeditions going on.

And then, after the state charges were dismissed (each of them carried Five-to-Life in the state of California: three or four different charges) the Feds stepped in and charged me with the murder of this National Parks Service ranger. And because there was no physical evidence linking me to the crime itself, the government chose to use two people who already had trouble with the law (one of them, I thought was a friend of mine; and like I said, this other guy that I didn't know) and in exchange for their testimony and all the rewards that they got, the Feds secured a conviction.

I appealed all the way to the US Supreme Court, and of course, got no relief. And I haven't got any relief up until this day. Including when I go to the Parole Commission.

One of the things they require is that you show remorse for the crime that you committed, and from my first time going there in 1983 up until the present, I've always maintained my innocence. I explained to the commissioners on more than one occasion that that places me in a dilemma, because it is one thing to have remorse and sorrow for something that you've done, but it's an impossibility to have remorse and sorrow for something that you haven't done.

And I have made it very clear to them that I did feel sorrow during my trial when I heard the ranger's wife testify about her husband:

I could tell that she loved him.

The taking of human life is something, it shouldn't be taken lightly. But at the same time, I've expressed over and over again that my life, in essence, was taken without remorse for a crime I had nothing to do with.

So that's the thing I have had to deal with, coming into prison as a young man—by the time I got to Atlanta, I was just turning twenty-seven and I've had all those birthdays in between. But basically, I became eligible for parole in 1983. I was sentenced to a life sentence, but in 1983 I became eligible for the first time for parole, and at that parole hearing they told me to continue to a full consideration hearing, which meant 1993. I took my court appeal all the way to the 9th Circuit and actually won the Appeal in the 9th Circuit, and that took ten years and the court ordered the Parole Commission to recompute my parole release date, give me an immediate new hearing, absent any erroneous and false information about an alleged assault that never took place—it took place, but I wasn't involved

in it.

And the Commission went through the motion of giving me a new hearing, and then said "Continued until 2/3rds Expiration," which is 2004. Since '83, I've gone to the Parole Board in '91, again in '93, '95, '98, 2000. (I haven't gone in 2002 yet.) And in 1993, for the first time, the Parole Board examiners recognized that something was wrong, and they attempted to give me a Parole Release date: they recommended I be released on December 7th, 1998 and they awarded me fifty-seven months for superior program achievement because there have been a lot of things I've done positive since I've been locked up. And it went to Washington and they took that back. And again in 1995, the Commissioners attempted to give me a 1998 release date, and again, it was taken back in Washington.

I appealed that decision, and thanks to the effort and support from numerous friends, too many to mention, I was able to get some very good legal representation. And now, we have a case in court down in Florida and it's right up to the ending point, whereas if the judge rules in my favor, I will get immediate release. If they rule not in my favor, then no doubt I'll be released in 2004—if life lasts and death passes.

But it's been an on-going struggle with the Parole Commission.

And I have to mention this, Eda: it's not just me. Particularly those who are considered political prisoners, like Leonard Peltier and Mumia Abul-Jamal in state prison, and many up in the state of New York—all over the country, about one hundred and fifty of us. That's the treatment that we received: we received long, lengthy sentences; in many cases, wrongfully convicted.

And in spite of the fact that we have pretty much been what they call "model prisoners" because we are who we are, we do what we do—in spite of all of that, we keep getting denied parole over and over again. Like Leonard just got denied parole on July 9th, this year. And Mumia got his case overturned in so far as the death penalty phase, and they're trying to re-sentence him either to life imprisonment or the death sentence.

But thanks to the many people whose eyes are now being opened, we're getting a lot of support. Because in the old days, there was very very little support. We were pretty much going on our own. Thanks to the untiring efforts of many people, I was able to get some very good legal representation. But in spite of that legal representation, the Parole Board has dug its heels in and has refused to honor its own rules, regulations and guidelines, as well as the law of the land.

And so we have a case in court that addresses all those issues and it will be decided in the not so distance future. Maybe within a month or two. Hopefully, less than that. Obviously, I'm eligible to

go every two years. So, I'm waiting.

—Because when I went in the year 2000, represented by my attorneys, the examiner told me he recommended I be released on Sept 12, 2001. And as witness our interview right now, this is 2002 and it's September 11th, and I still haven't been released. It's a lot of things that don't meet the eye. But at any rate, we continue to struggle.

Eda: How do you maintain the positive spirit—and sanity—after being in prison so long?

VERONZA: That's a question I'm often asked by a lot of the youngsters that are around today—when I look around prison today (because I was one of the younger guys in prison back in those days in Maximum Security penitentiaries)

And so I meet a lot of young guys— young, very very young with more time sentence-wise than they have been on the earth.

Like twenty-two or twenty-three years old with Life sentences and forty-five years, and they often ask me:

"Man, how do you do all of that time?"

That's the question.

But when you say how? Obviously, you just continue breathing—you know what I mean. But it's also (in my particular case) because I've always recognized that myself, as individual, I'm just a part, a small part, of the suffering of a People.

And so even though I've suffered the pain and despair of being separated from my loved ones—my mama: she's eighty-six years old now and in bad health; and my daughter, when I left her, she was five years old: now she's just had her thirty-sixth birthday—and married with two children, my grandkids. So that pain of that type of separation—longing to be with your family—can never go away. It's that 24/7 type of pain.

But I also recognize, when I look back and look at the suffering that Granny and Grandma and all the other grannies and grandmas and mommas and daddies and children who have been living lives that could be so much better (you know) if things had changed to some degree or another, that that individual pain and suffering, is long-standing; and so, my suffering becomes very little when you compare it, or make the connection between that type of suffering and the suffering that I endure as an individual.

And I'm surely not saying that because I understand a few things that I didn't understand when I was a little boy—if that makes it any easier. And of course with friends (and I could just name a whole list of friends and supporters who've given me courage, who've given me hope—guys in prison too . . . **This call is from federal prison . . .** but a lot of people who I have been in contact with over the years who have given unconditional love and support and friendship.

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And then when you look at the struggle of peoples throughout the world, you recognize that you have to live life somewhere.

And I recognize that. That whether I am in prison or out in the so-called "Free World" that I have to live my life somewhere. And I've determined long ago that I want to live it the best I can, and as fully as I can, wherever I am and wherever I find myself.

In those Maximum Security penitentiaries back in the old days, you used to do a lot of 'hard time', they called it; it reminds me of a poem: "Without the cold and disillusion of winter, there can never be the warmth and splendor of spring. Calamity has hardened me and turned my mind into steel." It's like the life of a willow tree: you learn to bend when you have to and weather the storm.

So people have told me: "Man, you seem to have found a way to maintain your sanity and dignity." And I remember reading in one of Nelson Mandela's books (you know, he did twenty-seven years over there in South Africa (he and his comrades)—and he said one of the hardest things that they found doing that type of incarceration and misery, was how *not* to adjust. That you maintain your dignity and self-respect, and honesty in dealing with people; and you care for people.

I think I've done that because that's the way I was raised. And so when people look and say, "You're a strong man," it's not because I'm a strong man but because I was raised by strong women and a strong people. And I'm just blessed and thankful that some of those characteristics of those people I just mentioned found a way into my own heart. I just do the best I can, because I love people, and I love life, and I've been blessed and fortunate enough to have good people in my life.

Like a master flute maker I know named Monty, and an eloquent lady, Kayo, and your sister, Anna. Those in the Jericho Movement: Safiya and Paulette and Herman. My sisters Cynthia, Rhonda, Voni & Joi, Betty, Jean Marie, Ovedia, Debbie, Debb. Mamma Mae, her beautiful daughter Theriseta. My attorneys: Neoma Kenwood, who fought single-handedly for ten years, Mr. Curtis Crawford, Mr. Benjamin Malcolm (may they rest in peace), Edward Hammock & Donnna Sullivan. John Neptune & the world of Shakuhachi. Maynard Garfield—the list goes on to where you just can't name all of the people who have influenced your life, and you accept that blessing as it comes.

One thing that I got to mention is that I had tried to escape in Lompoc in 1979, and I was shot and apprehended, as was my comrade.

Archie Fire Lame Deer sent a couple of warriors over and invited us into a sweat lodge ceremony of Native Americans, and from that ceremony, that day—it was a healing ceremony—I've adopted those ways and I walk that path of what is called the 'Red Road'. And that sweat lodge, the ceremonies—the discipline it takes and the connection with all living things—has made a significant change in my life.

—Including Shakuhachi: the blowing, the using of the breath, connecting with your inner self in meditation. Those kind of things, and healthy exercise and trying to eat the best you can, you can still smile in spite of the harshness of the environment. Environments do make a difference, but I don't think they are the determining factor in how you view the world and how you respond to that world.

Because today is a lot different than it was in the old days. And particularly, Eda, this institution where I am—Coleman, Florida. It's the first time (after twenty-six years) that I came to a lower-level security-type institution. It's unlike any other place I've been. I've never experienced an Administration like this one. Here, because of the broad vision of the warden and his administration, we're allowed to have quite a few programs that are meaningful. Programs in the sense that the guys can contribute something back to society. We have a little program we call YES—Youth Encouraging Support—wherein we are able to make contact through our program with young kids who they call 'trouble kids', but they really are kids in trouble. Kids from the ages eight, nine, ten, eleven; twelve, thirteen, fourteen who have been in trouble with the law. We're able to sit with them in the visiting room and interact and exchange a lot of ideas and feelings and thoughts—to try to make a difference.

We have a program called 'Non-Violence Training Outreach' an outreach program teaching guys self-respect and character building. We have a Fine Arts Department where we put on plays that are slices of life. These types of programs, because of the way things are going today, have been not allowed in many many places. So I think we're like pioneering and laying the groundwork for the future. Because today, there are so many young guys coming into prison, many of them without a GED, or communication skills. And we're able to make a difference.

And that is very meaningful to me as an individual.

So even though prison is a place where *no one* wants to be; because we are here, some will make a positive use of their years of confinement. —And some don't. And its real painful and terrible to see those that don't, who often times, through no fault of their own.

At any rate, all the little things combined together to either make you into a better human being, or break you and make you unrecognizable as a member of the human family when you are released.

Eda: *Today marks the anniversary of the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon which resulted in the deaths of thousands of Americans and undocumented workers. Could you describe what happened inside the prison that day, and how it has changed since September 11th.*

VERONZA: On that particular day, it was probably like everywhere else. What happened was something that we couldn't have even believed to be possible—the loss of that many lives all at once. And not just the lives that were lost immediately, but the families, the things and everyone that was affected by it.

There is one guy here, Siokatame Hafoka from the island of Tonga—that's way in the middle of the Pacific—he's a member of our Sweat Lodge ceremony. He's a big gentle giant—I mean a huge guy—and he's a gentleman and has a heart as big as he is. Big. And this guy (there are about 1700 people here in this institution) was so affected (as many people were), he fasted every single Tuesday, until today—till yesterday—which made it a whole year of fasting—without food or water. Just to remember that day and remember the spirit of what had happened.

I know that in other institutions, there was Lockdown; meaning everybody was locked into their cells. But this place is a lot different than a lot of other places and we didn't directly experience that—although a few guys got locked up because of their religious affiliations with Islam.

And you hear a diversity of attitudes. But I myself recognize that not only were a lot of innocent lives lost here, but that there have been repercussions on the people of Afghanistan and that people throughout the world have been effected by what happened that day. It think it was something like 2824 odd people have been identified through body parts that have been found. In my own mind and heart that was a great tragedy. And like in all wars of all times, war is a mutual slaughter of men and women, and those kinds of things they can only sadden the heart.

Eda: *If there was one thing that you could change in this world what would it be?*

VERONZA: I would love to be able to change the relations among men—when I say "men" I'm also including women. Humankind.

Because we talk about war, poverty, hunger and misery on the one hand, but it's opposite always exists. But it evolves down to the relationships. Relationships to me are very very important, and if there is to be a world free of sexism and fascism and ageism and all those other "isms" and schisms that divides humankind—not to mention racism, which is an artificial division of human being based upon skin color or positions and stations of life. . .

If we could go back in time to that time of what is called "primitive communal society", but really was a society when there was a lot of collective and mutual cooperation in order to survive against the beasts of prey and the forces of nature that man didn't understand; if things could be ordered in such a way (not ordered in a sense of a dictatorial thing) but ordered by mutual respect. . .

Like the way I grew up in a community. The elders had respect, not because they had authority being imposed upon those who gave the respect, but because that respect was well-earned and understood. And that's the type of respect that even great presidents and generals and foreign ministers don't have. . . **This call is from a federal prison. . .** because those things are not something that can be forced upon a people.

So if those relations change—relations to the point of production—then we could have a much better world where a woman would never know what it is to have to give up her body in prostitution, or people would never know what it was like to grow up in slavery, a beast of burden. That's what I would hope for for my children and grandchildren and the children after them, and yours, and those yet to be born. And it could be so. But that requires a lot of struggle and a lot of sacrifice and a lot of willingness of people to understand that unless we cooperate as a human species, then we are going to perish.

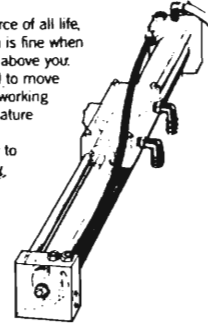
Eda: *Is there some advice you would like to tell youth in America today?*

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VERONZA: Yeah. It's been said (and it's not rhetorical) that the youth are like the sunshine at eight or nine o'clock in the morning—bright, full of beauty and vigor. And they will visit places where those of my generation and other generations can't even

dream of—yourself included. You have places to go that can only be dreamed of. So, the youth have a great responsibility—like all generations that come after the generation that's currently struggling to make a better world.

The youth have to take a sober look at that. Not in the sense of foregoing all the joys of life that come with youth, but also recognizing that youth, just like old age, is a passing thing, and it's here now and it will be gone.

So we listen to our past—reflecting on our past—and plan for the future and live in the moment . . . Often time we see that youth have been criminalized as a generation. They still are our hopes, because they are going to be the future leaders of tomorrow. And so, that responsibility that they have, that has been squarely laid on their shoulder, it will be a heavy burden. But I have full confidence in our youth—the hip-hop generation.

Every generation has its ways. The youth of today are very much in tune with life and the world around them. You hear it in the music, you hear it in the rap music; you see it in their dance, the way they walk and talk. It's just a matter of being willing to listen, as we all have problems listening when we are young. I pin my hopes upon the youth.

And when I see these youngsters come into the programs I was telling you about: we'll be out in the visiting room talking and you look in their eyes, and sometimes you see despair, and sometimes a few sparks flare up, and your heart hurts inside, because without some changes, then you know a lot of people will live half-butchered lives, who could otherwise live meaningful lives.

—Not just in the sense of being professional people like doctors and lawyers, but just contributing positive things to their own communities, and to their own families. That's where it starts at, with the family. And it goes out from there to the community and to the city and the state and the nation. And the world.

Eda: *What are your own future plans when you finally get out in the year 2004?*

VERONZA: If that happens—and like my mama always say: *If life lasts and death passes.* In other words, if I keep breathing and I am fortunate enough to be released in 2004 (or if I win my case down here in the court that I have going now, and am released immediately), I have a lot of plans.

One is to try to keep breathing—living. And I would really like to be able to open up a Meditation Healing clinic. Over the years I've studied and learned and practiced acupressure and hands-on-healing and tsubo therapy, and a variety of heal-

ing arts including blowing shakuhachi as a means of self-meditation healing, and have gained some insights and rewards doing all of that stuff to relieve pain.

Pain is a thing people don't have to necessarily live with—or "learn to live with" as the medical profession often says.

But pain can be relieved with the touch of a finger or the sound of a note, or the sound of a voice or a birdsong.

So I would like to try my best to open up a clinic of that nature and train some youngsters in that art of caring, and try to make a little difference in some lives, and take it from there . . . [*Loud commotion-sounds like: "Closed, closed, prepare for. . ."*] That's a big announcement.

Anyway, I really have to say that I'm very happy that my mother (who is eight-six years old), and my daughter Veronica, even though they suffered so much pain in my absence, that they've understood that I had to follow my dream for a better world for us all. . . **This call is from a federal prison** . . . Because at one time, I don't think they understood. But they do now. And those kind of things help one situated like myself, to continue. Those are the kinds of things that mean so much. And I want to thank you, and I want to thank Dan, and I want to thank all of the people at KZYX and all of you listeners who put up with all of my ramblings. Obviously, I definitely want to thank all of the people who have believed in me and have supported me. And I can only hope that that will continue, and that somehow in the future, that my own life—what I have left of it—will be used in a way that is befitting that type of unconditional love and support. . . **This call is from a federal prison. This is a prepaid call. This call is from . . . Veronza.**

□□□□

EDA: This concludes my interview with Veronza Bowers, Jr. a former Black Panther whose been incarcerated for thirty-two years and claims his innocence. He was speaking from the federal penitentiary in Coleman, Florida on September 11, 2002. If you would like more information about Veronza, or an update on his current case, please log onto www.geocities.com/veronzab To contact me, email me at eda@pacific.net.

This has been a special edition of *YouthSpeaksOut* produced by Dan Roberts and Eda Levenson. *YouthSpeaksOut* has its own website at www.youthspeaksout.net. There you can find more information about the project, get addresses for contacting us and listen to many hours of previous programs in streaming audio. We really encourage our listeners to give us feedback on our shows. You can do this through email at the website, or by writing us at **Youth Speaks Out**, p.o. box 1, Philo CA 95466. *YouthSpeaksOut* is broadcast live on the last Sunday of the month at 6 pm. •

text ©Dan Roberts 2002
photos courtesy of Veronza Bowers Jr.



medicine Veronza Bowers, Jr. . . . continues

April 2 2003

This call is from a federal prison. This is a pre-paid call. This call is from . . . Veronza.

Veronza, as I transcribed your conversation with Eda, I was taken by the story barely told: After several years of an unjust incarceration—enslavement, really—you attempt to flee. Unsuccessfully. After your capture, a Medicine Man rescues you, rescues your soul.

VERONZA BOWERS, Jr.: I like the way you put that: 'rescued my soul.' . . . Everything begins way deep inside, Beth. And it would probably be hard for you to imagine, being in prison at the the age of thirty-three years—young—and already having been in there for seven years, and inside of two maximum security penitentiaries, and like you said, by way of a wrongful and unjust conviction.

So I attempted to escape.

Myself and another—well, a comrade: and obviously we didn't make it, and we both got shot. And he got shot and temporarily paralyzed, and I got shot. And we got recaptured. And then months later when we got out of the segregation unit (I didn't know anything about the sweat lodge or purification ceremonies) one of the young warriors from the tribe of Five Feathers came over to the track where we were walking around, and said that the Medicine Man, Archie Fire Lame Deer—he's a Lakota: real big guy, a former Special Forces. His father is one of the well-known Medicine Men, named Fire Lame Deer (as a matter of fact, he has a book out called *Lame Deer Speaks*). Anyway, that's his son, and he's well-known as well. And he invited us over.

When we walked over to the area, he smiled and said: "I heard about you warriors. You need some healing."

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Then he said, "I would like to invite you into this ceremony today."

So we accepted, because it was a great honor. And we went inside. And that experience itself, like you put it, "saved my soul": that's one way of looking at it, because, as I reflect back over the years, I shudder to think how my life would have been had not I been introduced to that particular type of ceremony with that particular ceremony itself.

And I've been doing it ever since.

Because, you know, Beth: human beings, we feel. Some feel more than others and some feel different things, but we all feel. And I remember back during the war protests against the Vietnam war, feeling the power of the people gathered in San Francisco marching by the thousands. That was a certain kind of a power.

But sitting in that little simple lodge—they call it a *tukan tipi*, or an *inipi*. It's called a 'sweat lodge', but it's really a purification. And not just a purification of the body. The spirit, the soul, the body, the mind: all those things become one with all other living things. And just sitting in that little structure—it's made out of willow, done a certain way; and you sit before heated stones, and those heated stones, you come to understand them as being the Grandfathers. You sit before them; they're glowing red, and we recognize the fact that they have given their life in order for the ceremony to take place.

And so sitting in that ceremony with Archie Fire Lane Deer and the other Native Americans, some full-blood Lakota Oglala and a couple of Apaches—and others—you go on a journey, a journey inward, because of the extreme heat. And I came to understand that heat later on as being simply the Grandfathers' breath. Water is poured upon the stones, upon the Grandfathers.

Why are the stones known as the 'Grandfathers'?

VERONZA: We see that rocks have been on Earth as long as earth has been Earth. They come from many different places: you might get them from the river or the volcano bed to be used in ceremony. Native Americans and certain African tribes will use that same type of a ceremony; in South America, even.

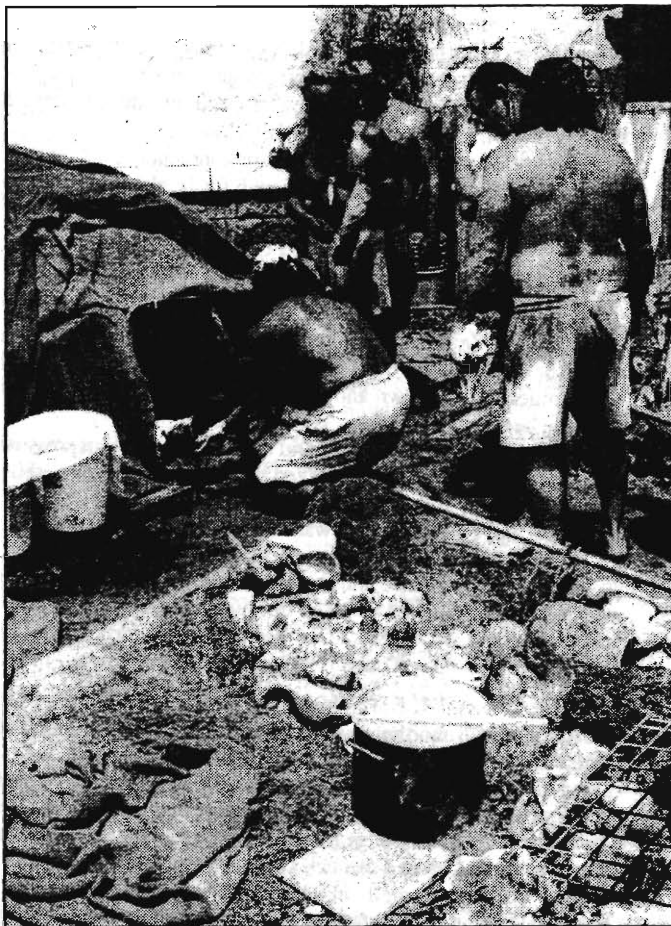
Those rocks have a lot of stories to tell and they are very, very old. And so, when they bring them and gather them to be used in ceremony, and they heat them in a fire outside for two or three hours—sometimes four hours—until they are glowing red; then we say they are the Grandfathers, because they have been there forever. And when they come inside, by sitting in that fire pit so long, they have given their life in order for a ceremony to be had.

And when you feel the power that radiates from them, when you are sitting there focusing, and the Medicine Man is pouring water—it's called *mini wakan* meaning sacred water, holy water poured upon the Grandfathers—and the breath (people look at it as steam), when that breath rises, it penetrates the whole being of the individual sitting inside that ceremony. Those ancient songs are being sung, and it takes you on a journey: a journey inward, a journey back in time, and a journey ahead in time, as you sit there in that moment. And they say you are going to the Spirit World. Because it is black-dark inside, except for the glow of the Grandfathers.

That experience left such an impression on me. And everywhere I went afterwards—and I've went to many different penitentiaries and prisons—I'm always welcome in the lodge: Archie Fire Lane Deer told me I would be welcome to come and sit in ceremony because he had brought me in, and brought my comrade in, in that sacred manner.

Veronza, do you you have Cherokee blood? You come from Cherokee land.

VERONZA: Yes. And I've just discovered that recently. I didn't know that before. For many, many years, I didn't know why I was drawn so strongly toward the Native American ceremony. And when I came down here to Florida in 1998, I have a cousin down here named Helen: she's in her seventies, and she's like the keeper of the family tradition and oral history. She's the one who told me, and she sent me a photograph of a great, great grandmother—maybe three greats—from 1867. She's with her husband, and they were on a Cherokee reservation in Oklahoma.



—But I didn't know anything about that Cherokee blood. It's strange that you would mention that.

It didn't seem so much like a transformation as a continuation, Veronza, that afterwards, you become the healer, adding other modes or skills, sometimes called techniques.

VERONZA: When we speak of healing, I smile inward, because I recognize that healing is. . . I wouldn't really call myself a "healer", although I have been a vehicle or a tool through which healing passes. I've been like a facilitator of that. And I've reflected on it since I knew we were going to do this, and I was thinking: *Wow! how and when?* and I looked back on my childhood growing up and I know that my great grandmother, Lilly Mae Johnson, and my grandmother, Alice Larkins, they did a lot of what's called 'home remedy': for dog bite and gout, and bleeding and bed wetting and corns and ringworm and earaches and coughs and flus and fevers, even measles and mumps and chicken pox and pink eye. and they always used home remedies.

See, I was one of the great-grandchildren and one of the grandchildren. one of the children, who didn't do a lot of playing. I used to listen a lot to the elders, and I'd watch them—even to the point sometimes when my mother and aunties would say: "*Boy, go on and play, Granny's tired!*" she'd just wink at me, and I'd go over and fake like I'm playing with the kids, and come back so she could tell me things.

But I didn't really lock on to all of that, until about 1978 when I was in Atlanta federal penitentiary and I hurt my back real bad, to the point where I needed a cane to walk. I hurt my sciatic nerve: pinched it in the lower lumbar region, and I was on a cane and they wanted to operate.

Back in those days, that was completely unacceptable, because bad things were happening, you know; so I wouldn't accept the operation, and they said, "*Okay. Well we're not going to give you treatment,*" and I wined up getting transferred to Marion, Illinois, which was at that time *the Super-Maximum penitentiary in the country of the federal system.*

And when I got there, they took my cane right away, and I had to go and lay out on the grass on my back, just to get some relief. I lay there all day, and a guy named Kenny Yates, he came and introduced himself to me and told me, "Man, I think I might can help you."

I said, "Well, if you can I would sure appreciate it" And he introduced me to a system of acupressure called Touch for Health, developed by a guy named John F. Phie, a doctor of chiropractic. Within a matter of a week or so, I was up running five miles a day.

Veronza, is this the first time in this whole long stretch of time that somebody has touched you with care?

VERONZA: Yeah, like that it was. Otherwise I had a few comrades and we would braid each other's hair, that was in Atlanta. Otherwise, you were pretty much on your own and you got to stay pretty much in a defensive type of mode because of the assaults and murders.

But with the mere fingertips and touching certain acupressure points, and massage in certain areas, it relieved the pain. I said, "Man, this is amazing." Then fortunately for me, I wound up going to Lompoc in '78, '79 and he was out there, and I said, "Man, I want to learn something about that."

He had some books and he recommended some other books and I began to study, and I would go and watch him, how he worked on people, and he would work on me, and then I in turn would work on him. Eventually it just jelled in some kind of way, and since then I've added a lot of other things to it, aside from just the Touch for Health and acupressure—like tsubo therapy.

What is that? Is that a remote touch therapy?

VERONZA: Tsubo therapy is more of a detailed action related to acupressure. Acupressure has meridians where the energy flows; the tsubo is actually going to those points along those meridian lines to relieve specific problems of imbalances . . . [a soft bell-like pop sounds through the receiver]

Beth, we've just run out of the first fifteen minutes. I'll have to wait another fifteen minutes before I can call back.

Veronza, before you continue the narrative of the evolution of your healing practices, I wanted to return to braiding: In many American communities, braiding was the only portion of African culture passed down, that survived virtually intact: the languages were lost because people from the same villages were deliberately dispersed; drumming was banned from most of the enslavement camps that were called "plantations". But you could hide hair under a kerchief, and braiding became an intimacy carrying history, passed from mother to daughters. In Cleveland, Ohio, where I come from—this was in the mid 1960s—often I would watch my neighbors, their daughters between their knees, braiding intricate patterns that were so exactly the same as those I'd seen in the portraits of modern-day Kenyan women. Not motifs they'd learned from a magazine, patterns they'd brought up with them from rural Alabama. Please tell me more about braiding in prison, braiding in your own life.

VERONZA:

You know, back in the old days we weren't really allowed to have long hair, or beards on our faces. But after a long struggle and a class action lawsuit, and obviously, transfers and going to the Hole and all those things, we finally won the human right to wear our hair anyway we wanted it.

So I had long hair—a big bush; that was before my dreadlock days.

I've always looked at hair as being something sacred. Even when I was a young boy I used to (what they call) "scratch" my grandmother's and great-grandmother's, even my mama's hair. Scratch the scalp and comb it. And so I learned about hair: they would never let their hair that breaks off, they would never just discard it like trash. They would ball it up and either set it afire, or dig a little hole and bury it.

They'd say: "If you don't do that, boy; a bird will pick it up and you'll get bird-brains." —those little sayings like that. And so I kept those things with me, and when my hair was long, only people I was close to would I allow to braid it. We called them 'plaits'. And likewise with the ones who I would plait their hair. So we had a little camaraderie like that.

When you asked me if it were the first time I was touched with care when a guy helped me with my back. It was only amongst comrades and close friends that we could even allow ourselves the—I won't say the 'vulnerability'—the joy of being touched, because there was so much violence around.




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So we would plait each other's hair: we would take our turns, and sometimes I would make long plaits, some would make cornrows and all kinds of nice designs. Those were relaxing moments where just touch itself was like a healing process. That became the cornerstone of my healing work with Touch for Health and that's probably why I gravitated towards it so much. I knew a little about acupressure from my martial arts days, but just the time we would take to do that with each other, was like quality time. And when I got transferred to Marion, Illinois, I didn't have any other comrades around.

Veronza, before we move on: you said you've always felt that hair was sacred. The example you used some might interpret as superstition—about the bird picking the hair up. What is the difference for you . . .

VERONZA: Old people have a lot of sayings. And people say, "Oh, that's superstition. That's old wives tales." But it has a kernel of truth in it, and a lesson to be learned. For instance, the hair being discarded and they say: 'If a bird picks it up you'll get bird brain.'

They don't mean that literally that you'll get bird brain. They're just telling you as a young kid to pay attention: don't just take those kind of things for granted and just discard it like so much trash. Because it is something that goes with you, and you should care for it. Even when you are not going to obviously keep it. Same thing with fingernails, but hair in particular. Sometimes people go to the barbershop and get their hair cut and it lays on the floor and they sweep it all together; I've always felt that was contrary to the way I understood human beings should deal with things that were a part of themselves. I remember I got a tooth pulled here, and they don't let you keep them anymore. In the old days, you could keep it and do what you wanted with it. I would bury mine.

Did you feel that your hair was in anyway connected to your strength? Or was it a different sense of sacredness?

VERONZA: In the sense, Beth, that I believe that a human organism should be, as much as possible, in a state of balance. And the hair that grows on our heads, and the muscular structure, and our energy systems—all of those things—in order to be balanced, you have to pay attention. For instance, grooming: animals do it, women do it with their children, grooming their hair. And so I say 'sacred' in that sense. All living things are sacred, and obviously hair is a living thing because it is part of a living organism. And so, I just look at it that way, not in any mystical or non-physical or superstitious kind of way.

Let's continue with the ways, over the years, you've used to facilitate healing in others.

VERONZA: Healing begins with the self. With the honor Archie Fire Lame Deer gave to me, and the Native American brothers I have been in contact with since (the Lombe, and the Cherokees and the Apaches and the Arapaho and the Lakota) you see that sense of the sacredness in the ceremony, and the way they walk upon the earth. Especially in the presence of a Medicine Man.

In that way, I've understood the healing begins with the self, and I've worked a lot on my own self: through meditation, through breathing, through stretching—all those (I guess you would call them) disciplines—and once I accumulated some practical experience by working with Kenny Yates, touching people . . .

I should go back to the original story: After we tried to escape, me and my comrade—I was wounded and he was wounded badly: so much so that a year later, he could only walk on a cane. We were at Lompoc at that time—that was August 1st, 1979, and they transferred me to Lewisburg in January or February, and I came back a year later and we reconnected.

The day I came back, he met me in the Receiving and Discharge area. I looked into his eyes, and I saw—he looked like he had just come out of a cave. He was very much withdrawn, and when I talked to him about it, he said, "I just stay in my cell."

You know, Beth, they call it "Training" now. Back then, it was what you would do with a comrade, a brother. We would go to the track, and I would set the cane down and hold his hand and we would take off running; and once he got his momentum, I could let go of his hand and we could run five miles. And as we began to come in at the end of the run, we would slow down, and I would ease next to him and hold his hand for balance again until we stopped, and then he had to get back on the cane.

He couldn't walk. But we could run.

There's an old African saying: 'If you can walk, you can dance; and if you can talk, you can sing.'

Or like the stutterer who can't talk, but can sing, because those two abilities are separate, enabled in different areas of our brain. Or is the moral here that running is a freedom—the very mindset it elicits; walking more an act of captivity. What kind of block do think was removed when he was running that returned when he had to walk?

VERONZA: On the physical side of it, the bullet had entered his back and traveled and kissed the shell of his spine and disrupted those things down there that pertained to his locomotion, then lodged in his hip bone. So he had to walk with a cane, and only with much difficulty. But I just figured that once we got moving (because that's the way I taught my daughter to ride a little motorcycle, you know, holding on to her until she found her momentum.) He was a strong guy. Will power and the human spirit, wanting to be able to do what he did before: I think that

combined with some of the techniques that I used with him: the acupressure techniques and stretching and massaging and talking—all of that—put him in a position where he *could* do it.

Through the years, I've always been concerned about people. Obviously, I was in the Black Panther Party and we were trying to do some things for the people. Now I deal with others more on an individual basis, where if there is pain (which comes from an imbalance, even a disease—like dis-ease—the body is not in a state of balance; and through blowing Shakuhachi, working with the skeletal structure, the muscular structure, the energy systems, you can bring about balance, which helps with healing.

In Irish tradition, the shanachie—under British rule—were the transmitters of Celtic culture (which the British outlawed.) Thus they sang their songs, and told the stories behind the hedgerows, secreted. Are you able to heal openly in the prison system? or have you had to heal in the shadows of the hedgerow, so to speak?

VERONZA: In the early days it was in the shadows. In this type of a place, it runs like it is self-perpetuating. And that whole idea of touching: *Oh, men touching men!* there had to be some homosexual activity going on—or violence. There was no touching in a caring way.

So first they would come and confiscate my books. And after awhile, because I kept doing it and doing it, they just said: *"He's going to do it anyway,"* so they pretty much left me alone. Now it's openly.

How do the tones of Shakuhachi heal, Veronza?

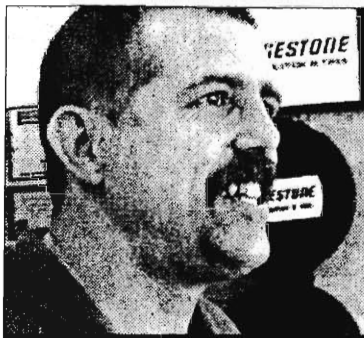
VERONZA: Shakuhachi is like the sweat lodge. When I was introduced to shakuhachi by Monty Levenson, way back in '87—he sent me a flute he had made, and I finally got a sound out of it; what I found was that that sound reverberates so deeply into the soul and into the spirit, and into the heart.

At Terre Haute, I established a mediation group: we called it 'Self-healing Meditation with Shakuhachi'. And through the practical experience of blowing, while guys are laying down on their backs, I discovered . . . **This call is from a federal prison . . .** We used the chakra systems and the color systems related to that chakra system:

Red and orange and yellow and green and blue and violet or indigo and white. Those seven chakras, starting with the red at the base (which incidentally, corresponds to a note on the musical scale: the note C. And orange with the note D; yellow with the note E; and green with the note F or F#; blue with the note G; violet or indigo with the note A; and white with the note B. And you go back up.

Because red also, is a root: the grounding of human energy. The orange is dealing with the reproductive organs. The yellow is identified with the solar plexus or the breathing; and green with the heart, where the emotions and feelings are. The blue is with the throat for communication; the indigo with the Third Eye, that inner vision where you see things. And the white is like the crown that opens to the Universe.

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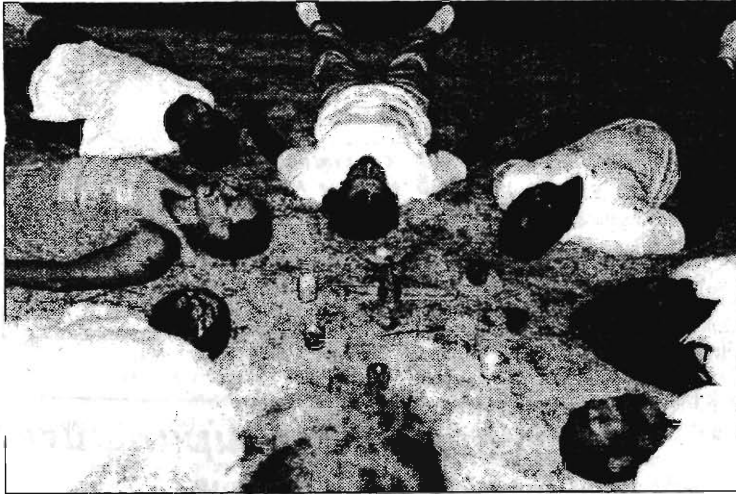
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The men would lay on their backs the colored candles there in the center, with volcano rock, with a jar of water—all of the elements: earth, wind and fire and wood—they would lay with everyone's head facing those candles, and I discovered or learned—I learned—that the chakras could be balanced, and the energy systems could be balanced, and once the energy systems could be balanced, then the muscular structure through massage therapy, and then the skeletal structure through manipulation of bones, can be set in a state of balance and we could wind up eliminating a lot of pain.

That's a trip in itself. Actually going through that process and actually seeing it happen—with this guy, Punchy. . . . that's the bell.

This call is from a federal prison. This call is from: Veronza.

VERONZA: Punchy. When I look back, it was such a rewarding experience, and a learning experience. Because those kinds of things, you never know what's going to happen . . . I'd got that nice shakuhachi from Monty, and I used to go out to the yard. There was a little lone tree, and I would sit under the tree and just blow. Blow with my eyes closed.

And one day, I opened my eyes and looked up, and I saw this guy sitting in a wheelchair being pushed by a guy. Back in those days, that was a rare sight to see someone in a wheelchair. It's not like that now: you see a lot of wheelchair guys.

So I'm looking at him, and I see that he is young, and I see a guy pushing, and he's young, and they're just walking around. So I close my eyes and I continue to blow. But I'm the type of guy—I feel a lot—and I could feel his pain. And I said, *Man, that's got to be terrible to be in prison, and have to ride around in a wheelchair.*

A few days later, I approached his driver and asked him to introduce us—because you just don't walk up to people, you know, and we went through that little ritual of introductions. Then I said to him, "Man, I think I can help you." And I explained to him about some of the things that I do, some of the ancient hands-on healing methods that I do. And of course, he didn't understand any of that, because here's a young black guy out of Detroit, had been paralyzed from the waist down for three and half years. And his legs had shrunk all up.

Anyway, I explained what I had been working on. And I said, "We might can do something, and maybe not . . ."

He was kind of skeptical about it, I could see it in his eyes, but he agreed anyway. And so we made arrangements and met. Then I started working on him: massaging, acupuncture, and we kept at that for a good month or so, and there was no change: no significant change, no subtle changes. We were just working. And I realized that it was more than just a physical thing that we had to deal with, and so I asked him if he would come to a meditation session, because I had just organized a meditation group with in the Rastafaran community: we met once a week.

He said, "Okay," so I went to pick him up, and I had to carry him up the stairs on my back, to the area where we meditated at.

In the meantime, I gathered together seven different guys from the Rastafaran community, plus a couple other guys, who in my observation of them over the years, they were pretty much balanced physically, mentally, and spiritually, and they ate a relatively good diet—healthy diet, anyway: not a lot of meats and greasy foods . . .

Once I got everybody together, I set everybody down up in the chapel and explained to each one of them what we were trying to do. Because you have to understand, a situation like this, we don't know, I don't know, nobody really knows, but we were willing to try something and see if we could bring about any kind of improvement. And so, what I did was use some of the traditions of the Sweat Lodge.

Inside the Sweat Lodge we have what we call the 'Directions'. We say the Spirit dwell in each of those Directions. We lay Punchy down in the center of the Circle—we built a circle around him, actually, with one guy to the North, one guy to the West, one guy to the East, one guy to the South, and a couple in between. Father Sky, where the sun is; Mother Earth and all of our relations. And that is a tradition out of the Lakota Lodge for healing. The North represents the healing of the North Wind. Like Mother Earth has to try to recuperate from the blistering summer, and that's what she does in the wintertime. I had the strongest guy—the guy who I thought was the strongest spiritually—I had him lay with his head to the North.

While we were doing this, I was blowing Shakuhachi and watching everything and everybody; and after awhile of blowing, the guy in the North—it was such a strange thing that happened—he started rolling his head back and forth and moaning and then groaning, like he was in serious pain.

This is all new, you know: so I just observed it and continued to blow and he continued to roll his head back and forth, all the while, Punchy is just laying there. He's not moving. He's went under—somewhere he's went. And everybody else is pretty much out, too.

It was like that for an hour and a half—maybe an hour and forty-five minutes. I just kept blowing different sounds with Shakuhachi. When I stopped blowing, everybody just lay there, and I gave the instruction to rub your hands together and wash your face with the energy of your hands. To bring them back to this plane of existence.

Punchy was the last one. He was out, still and when he woke up—I say "woke" in that sense—we all laughed, because the first thing he said—in his language of Ebonics: "Where I been?!!"

And we all bust out laughing.

But then, I was really intrigued by what I had seen and experienced. The brother who was laying in the North (he used to be a bass player for Miles Davis, by the way) I had no idea he was that connected psychically. I asked him, I said: "Man, what was happening. Why were you moaning like that?"

He said, "Man, I've got to tell you about it."

Everybody else left and we went into the little stairwell of the chapel, and I said, "I'm going to blow again, and you sit there and write down what you experienced, if you can."

And so we recreated that space, that time, that moment—moments running. I blew again and he wrote down his experience.

Darryl (that was his name) he wrote of Punchy as 'The Wounded One'. He wrote about channeling his energy towards the Wounded One, concentrating on the lower half of his body, and he wrote about feeling so much pain. And he recorded the color red, and the color orange, the color blue. That's how I discovered how very real it was, that chakra system: red being the root of grounding; orange the reproductive organs, Punky being paralyzed from there down. And that he kept talking about that color blue, which represents the throat chakra of communication. It was like Punchy was communicating through Darryl while he was laying there.

The next day, I got with Punchy and for the first time, he really opened up, and we both cried. We both cried while we were talking, and he opened up: talked about his fear of never being able to walk again—because his doctors had told him he never would walk again—and being in a place like a

Maximum Security Penitentiary, and not ever being able to walk again. It was very frightening to him. He didn't have physical pain, the paralyzation left him numb. That's why his legs had shrunk all up with atrophy. They were real skinny, like little bones.

Once we talked, we both felt better about the journey we were going to go on together and so we made an agreement—really it was a pact together. I said, "Man, it's going to take a lot of work, on both of our parts, and we'll see if we can make any progress. —We'll just do it."

So we set up a regimen. Each session we would start out with Shakuachi, me blowing Shakuachi, he laying there listening. I began again to massage his legs and began to stretch his legs. Stretching. Because I always believe that strength lies in flexibility. It's like a crowbar: his legs were so stiff and locked together at the knees, they wouldn't open up. Finally, I got them opened up a full split—and did it gently, a little at a time, a little at a time, daily, daily, daily. And we worked out a program where I would pick him up, take him to the yard in his chair, and we would lift weights for upper body strength.

I got him to stop eating sugars and all kinds of garbage food, and buying Vitamin C and E and D and protein powder instead. And got him eating pretty good. And we worked with acupressure and tsubo therapy and jinn shin do, which I try to use to deal with the imbalances in the body—the chemical, emotional, muscular imbalances as well as energy. Through doing that, his vital energy that comes from the Mother from behind the navel, began to slow. And I could actually feel it, and he could feel it. His legs started getting stronger, from the stretching and his upper body started getting strong from lifting weights. I would pick him up out of his chair and lift him up to the bar, and he would do pull-ups. And I would hold his legs on the ground while he would do push-ups. I would sit on his legs while he would lift weights with a bench press. So the upper body got strong very swiftly. Young guy, twenty-nine years old, had been paralyzed for three years . . .

As a result of what?

VERONZA: As a result of a gunshot wound in the back, in Detroit. . . We did this, Beth, for ten months (this was in 1990.) Everyday. And we actually worked, sometimes, three or four hours a day. Some mornings I would go to pick him up in the little unit he stayed in that was set aside for handicapped people, and he would be in the bed and just don't want to go. And I would go in there and punch on him, and go: "Come on man, let's go." I'd grab his toothbrush out of his locker, and put the toothpaste on it and stick it in his mouth, and the spark would go back into his eye. I'd put him in the chair and we'd go down the hallway, and the Administration authorities, nobody ever said anything.

A few times the guys would say: "Man, you're working him too hard."
"Mind your business."

And Punky would say, "Yeah, mind your business."

We became very close—more like brothers.

Over a period of time, we finally got to the point where I would stand in front of him, put my palms out facing up, and he would put his hands in my hand—both hands—and we would do body squats. At first he was trembling—real shaky—and we would keep going, keep going until he could go a little lower. And by the end of that ten months, he could do 200 body squats: he could go down parallel and come back up—strong squats. As a result of that, the muscles of his legs started to get bigger. And one day he was working, and I was massaging his legs, and he felt some feeling in his legs—*"Man! I can feel that!"*—those nerves trying to re-attach.

I used to sit down in his wheelchair and we'd get on the quarter mile track, and he'd get behind me with his braces on his legs and push me around the track for a quarter of a mile—we're talking about a dirt track. And other guys in the compound would look at us and root him on.

And we had planned on entering a little race, but we got separated before that happened. Because by then he could walk five steps on his own, without any help. He could stand up and I would pace off from him, and he would take his time—focus: we worked a lot on focus and concentration—he would take his time and put one foot forward, and put another foot forward, and the first time he walked five steps, and he collapsed in my arms and we cried again, because that's part of healing, too. That bonding.

It was such an experience, it was undescrivable. I attempt to put it in words, but you can't really . . .

Early on in New Settler, I interviewed Freeman House, an early salmon


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restoration worker in the Mattole. He was so eloquent in his discussion of the place of their hand-hewn hatchboxes in the planetary systems. But as Freeman was explaining the actual techniques, I was having trouble visualizing it all, and expressing my frustration, I said something like: "Gee, I wish I was making a movie instead doing this as an interview for a newsprint magazine." Freeman responded "Doesn't really matter, because the real media is putting your hands into the freezing water and doing the work." If you're not there, you missed it . . .

Veronza, how do you think the specific scale of notes on the shakuhachi coordinate with the distinct colors in the spectrum while the human form is prone?

VERONZA: That applies not just when the human form is prone, but even sitting, even standing. I've done a lot of experimental work in another group. Music is sounds, and the human organism is a receiver (as well as a transmitter) receiving sounds. If you are in an environment where there is a lot of aggravating noise—rattling of tin cans, scraping on the blackboard with your fingernails—it goes through you and you shudder with it. Those are energies, and the way I look at it, the human body—all living things, really—are composed of energy, and sound has an energy too: sound waves have a vibrational frequency.

So, if in fact the notes on the musical scale correspond and correlate to the colors of the rainbow spectrum and the chakra centers from the root all the way to the crown . . .

While I'm blowing shakuhachi, and the participators in the meditation session are laying on their backs, covered in a blanket to keep their shell warm, as their body relaxes and the temperature drops, I've been able to see those chakras spinning, like a vortex.

And they have definite color patterns—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet, indigo, white; and each of those colors, as well, contain all the other colors. It's just that at a given point in the body, in the chakra, one particular color is more dominant than all the rest.

We look at things from this approach of healing as interconnected and interrelated: only looking at it for purposes of analysis and discussion can we separate them into categories and put labels on them. From the martial arts I learned that right behind the navel resides that primary life source I spoke of earlier. We call it *chi* in the Chinese systems; the Korean systems might call it *ki*; in India they call it *prana*, the breath—that's given to us at birth by our mothers, and their mother, and their mother, and their mothers on back through time.

I'm biased to Shakuhachi because for me it's like the sweat lodges: it took me to a whole other level of understanding of exis-

tence with my own self, and I see it's effect upon people, just the sound of the notes as I blow. Thewhys of all of that, the scientific analysis, is in the proof of eating of the pudding. —But it could be another musical instrument. It could be the human instrument.

I learned from Monty's wife Kayo, the sound *Ahhhh*—is like the beginning; and *Nn* is the ending. And I've done some experimentation with that sound alone. I use a technique called muscle testing, in which you test a particular muscle or muscle group of an individual—not pitting my strength against the individual's strength, but checking out for the internal integrity of the muscle itself. And if it is weak, I've discovered that sound *Ahhhh*, done individually or in a group while you are standing like you're standing on horseback (it's called a horse rider stance) as you make that sound, it immediately rectifies the imbalance in that particular muscle. Because weaknesses come from imbalances. And so the stretching, and eating wisely . . .

We began with your journey in the presence of a Medicine Man: to me it sounds as if all of these modalities of healing you practice take place in the presence of the medicine man who you have become. The shakuhachi as much a wand. Since we have so little time left, I'd like you to muse on that, on yourself as you have emerged, evolved as a Medicine Man within this federal penitentiary system.—Wherever you go, you bring your medicine with you. . .

VERONZA: Yes. I accept that responsibility. . . . **This call is from a federal prison.** . . . not because I consider myself that, but because of the things that I do.

And I know it's a great responsibility when you touch someone in any way.

Whether it is touching for health and helping, or you touch them in a violent way, you have a responsibility.

I prefer to touch in a healing way. And even a smile—sometimes you'll see a guy depressed and feeling bad. . . . [loud instructions over a PA system in the background] and even a smile that you learned from old people (especially women) the smile can really change someone deep inside.

But what does the presence—the presence—of the Medicine Man add? You mentioned much earlier how important the presence of the Medicine Man was when you were in the presence of a Medicine Man of the tribe of Five Feathers.

VERONZA: Because it was something like no other presence that I've felt. And it is because they walk so close with the Spirit. And it was the knowledge that they had about sacred things and all that goes with traditions—people that have traditions.

And that true of you, maybe always has been.

VERONZA: You know what—and not just because of modesty—in truth, I am still searching, and I feel I just do what I do, and

just be thankful that I am able to do that without considerations of what I have become. I know I have become a better human being, and that is because of my total life experiences, which include all of the people that I have come in contact with..

—And I want to include the names of four other Medicine Men whom I've been in Ceremony with. Sonny Fostier, Nee Gah Nee Gah Bow (Eugene Begay), Stone Hawk (Tony Wright), Running Deer (Hiram Robinson). Each of these Medicine Men has had and continues to have a great influence upon my life and I feel I must give each of them honor here, even if it's only in this small way of mentioning their names.

Though, if we have time for one more story: Eugene Begay used to come into Terre Haute penitentiary quite often be be with us at Pow wow times. I would 'doctor on' him (as he called it), and once he said to me, "Ain't it funny? With all the big shot doctors all over the country I could see, I come all the way down here to a federal prison to see my Doctor." And he laughed that big healing laugh of his.

The first time I touched him in a 'doctorin' session, my body buzzed for two days and nights. I couldn't eat . . . and I dreamt many dreams and saw many faces of Ancestors in the Spirit World.

And I knew we had done a Sacred Thing.

What I'm saying is, I just try to be a better human being from moment to moment. And I find that to be very important, not only especially in these times, but all the time. Because the journey that we are on, the journey that I find myself on, if I can help in any kind of way, then I feel good. And that good feeling multiplies itself. As you feel better and better about yourself, you can do better and better things. It's like making love: that mutual connection between a man and a woman, of caring. It's just another form of love. And that's very important in my life, and it's just unfortunate—unfortunate in the sense that I have been locked up so long—but I didn't squander my time. I tried to do what I was always told when I was a young boy: to be the best that you can, and continue to try to grow—like a flower grows . . .

And can grow through the cracks in places of concrete and cement. . . . Do you know where the name 'Veronza' comes from?

VERONZA: I get it from my father. I'm a Jr. It's a Spanish name, because my father has Spanish blood, too; and the closest translation that I've heard of that name—or the closest word I've heard to the name is that in Spanish it's 'esperanza' and *esperanza* means 'Hope'. That's the closest I've heard to it, and I've never heard the name otherwise, other than as that of my father and myself, and one of my sisters named her first-born son after me, Veronza. •

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photos courtesy of Veronza Bowers, Jr.

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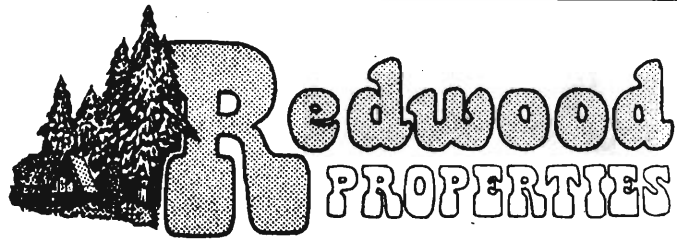
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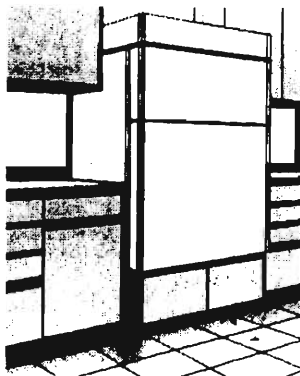
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