



Talk with Dina Milito – Minutes Before Six (MB6)

A talk between Ines Aubert, Switzerland and Dina Milito, California, October 2018

Dina, I got in touch with you after an inmate to whom we are both writing asked me to do so. After you and I talked a bit, we found out that we have some things in common. Both of us have our personal pen friends, but are in contact with other inmates in the context of our projects: yours being the Minutes Before Six and mine the connectdeathrow.org. What is “Minutes Before Six”?

It’s been a pleasure to get to know you, Ines, and your interest in and support of Minutes Before Six (MB6) is greatly appreciated. The goal of MB6 is to provide a website platform for the work of incarcerated writers and artists from all over the United States. We do not buy or sell anything; we share art and writing with the free world.

Why did you choose this name?

The name was chosen before I joined the project, when it was the writings of one Death Row prisoner. 6pm is the time that prisoners in Texas and many other states are executed.

How did this project begin?

Thomas Whitaker founded MB6 in 2008, after having been remanded to Death Row in Texas. He spent 11 years on Texas Death Row before being granted clemency in February 2018.

I had been the victim of a violent crime as a college student. I found MB6 online while reading the writing of prisoners, which was part of my healing process. What Thomas expressed in his writing made me feel like he was looking for some answers from his side of the bars, as I was, and moved me to reach out to him, something I had never done before.

Thomas and I were pen pals for three years before he invited me to join the project. Originally intended as a way for Thomas to share his experience with loved ones, MB6 attracted a rapidly expanding readership, eventually reaching thousands each week. He opened up the platform to other contributors--first his neighbors on Death Row, then other prisoners throughout the United States. MB6 was formally established as a non-profit organization in 2017.

Are you a team or do you maintain the project alone?

MB6 is very much a team effort. We currently have fifteen free world volunteers and well over 100 incarcerated contributors, as well as wonderful board members who advise on goals and managing the project. I work with an amazing group of people on this project. All MB6 volunteers, including me, sign waivers agreeing to honor the privacy of other volunteers, so while I can’t discuss the identities of our volunteers, I can say that we have fifteen volunteers who donate hours of their time and energy regularly, and we could not operate without their efforts.

So, it was a death row inmate who started the organization - that's amazing. Can you tell me a little more about Thomas Whitaker?

Thomas Bartlett Whitaker is serving a life sentence in Texas. Since entering prison, he has earned his undergraduate degree (graduating Summa Cum Laude from Adams State University), and is receiving a Masters Degree in Humanities from California State University Dominguez Hills this fall. He has won first place three times for fiction and essay in the PEN Prison Writing Contest, and is a PEN Writing for Justice 2018 Fellow. His writing has been published in the Solitary Watch anthology "Hell Is a Very Small Place," and more than 150 pieces of his writing have been published on "Minutes Before Six".

I'm impressed about the many people who visit your page. What is the feedback you receive from the readers? Or in other words, what impact does MB6 have?

Our readers leave comments for MB6 contributors both on the website and on Facebook, and many of our contributors hear from readers directly. It is our hope that all contributors to MB6 receive some outside support as a result of their efforts.

MB6 impacts all of the contributors and volunteers in a positive way. We feel like we are making a difference in the world, which is our driving force. And I assume that our readers feel the same way, based on the number of visitors we have regularly.

From what I understand, you are the only person who is visibly active for MB6 while the others are more in the background. So I assume everything goes through your hands and your computer. Can you show us your computer place?

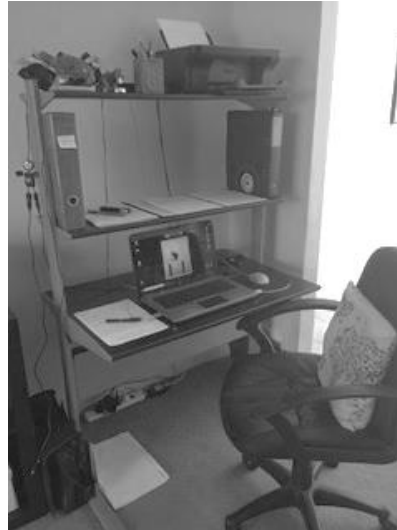


Dina's work place

I use a laptop so I move around my house and don't really stay in one location, but I think this will do for your purposes.

Our project is most definitely a group effort and while I do play a key role, MB6 could not function the way we do without the help of many hands, as I said above. Teri O'Neill is my partner on the project. She lives in Australia, where she works to help in preserving language and heritage, conserving the environment, and improving cultural, social, health, wellbeing,

and economic outcomes for Aboriginal people. At MB6 she's a volunteer: Secretary and Treasurer on the Board of Directors.



Teri's work place

I see a few similarities between MB6 and my project. I have people who help me type out texts for the homepage too. Yet, a big part of what is written is part of the interaction between the inmate and the person who makes use of the project. These letters, of course, are not available to the public.

I receive a lot of positive feedback from both parties. Some of the users of the project give speeches at their school or write diploma theses about the death penalty. So, the interaction with the inmate provides a lot of useful information to them. I once attended a presentation at which the girl introduced her findings. The man sitting next to me told me that his daughter was the girl's friend and that he and his wife were impressed by the topic she had chosen and by what she found out. To me, that was a sign of the waves of awareness a single person – even at a young age – can cause when they take on a topic like the death penalty. This is what my workplace looks like:



Ines' work place

Is there a way I can find texts on the MB6 website about a particular topic, for example about gangs?

Yes, there is a search box in the upper left hand corner of the page that allows you to do searches. You can also look up writing and art by the contributors' names using a list in the right sidebar.

What are the conditions for an inmate to have his writings posted on your homepage and how do you proceed?

Writers submit their work to MB6 by mail or email. Minutes Before Six
2784 Homestead Road #301
Santa Clara, CA 95051
U.S.A.

I evaluate whether it's a good fit for our project. We are open to all types of writing – memoir, fiction, essay, plays and poetry, to name a few of the most popular. We avoid posting anything that might cause problems for the writer with the prison administration, his/her case or his/her neighbors. We also avoid posting essays about a writer's case unless it reflects a bigger picture issue. For example, Thomas Whitaker wrote an article on Willie Johnson's case, using it as an example of eyewitness testimony gone wrong and this was a great illustration, using a particular case to support an overarching idea.

Once the writing has been accepted, it goes through a typing and editing process and then gets added to our publishing schedule. Once it's published, we mail the contributor a printed copy, along with any comments readers have left. Writers can respond to comments by mailing their replies to me to post.

Submissions that are not accepted are returned to the writer with an explanation of why it's not a good fit for MB6.

Can you give me an example of a contribution that didn't fit?

Yes. One writer heard from prison staff that the warden of the prison had been arrested for driving under the influence and he wanted to write about it for MB6 and I said no to that. I couldn't verify whether or not it was true, but even if I'd been able to, I imagine the fallout from publishing such information would negatively affect all involved. We are not about tearing people down, we are about building a positive project.

Do you have any future plans for MB6?

We have gained some wonderful new free world volunteers this year and we hope to continue to expand our stable of writers and artists. The more volunteers and contributors we have, the more we can accomplish. We have also begun to apply for grant money, now that we have our non-profit status and that would aide enormously in our project's growth.

I wish you all the best with the MB6 project, Dina! Thank you and your volunteers for the great work you're doing! I hope we can stay in contact.